The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

EUGENE SCHMIEL

Interviewed by: David Reuther
Initial interview date: January 15, 2010

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INTERVIEW

Q: To start this interview, can you give us some background on your family, where you grew up?

SCHMIEL: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on February 2nd, 1944. All of my ancestors were immigrants from Poland who emigrated in the 1880s. I grew up in an area of Cleveland where perhaps 80% of the people were of Polish ancestry. At our Catholic Church, on Sundays there were seven masses, and for the sermons, five were in Polish; two were in English. The masses were in Latin, of course.

My grandparents emigrated when they were less than five years old, so they likely didn't remember much about the "old country" as it was called by everyone. But there were many others who did remember, and the influence was pervasive, and the language at home was Polish.

The focus in our family, as in many others, was on church, Polish heritage, hard work, and understanding that we (Polish immigrants) weren't really going to rise much beyond a certain level in society, a type of self-imposed inferiority complex.

I remember my paternal grandmother telling me once, "Gene, you're a very smart boy. Someday, when you work in the factory, you can be a foreman."

Q: What part of Cleveland was that in?

SCHMIEL: It was near to downtown, West Seventh Street. My father worked for Standard Oil. John D. Rockefeller founded Standard Oil in Cleveland. My father said John D. Rockefeller would appear downtown, walk amongst the kids and hand out dimes. My father recalled getting a dime from him once around 1912. A dime is the equivalent of about $10 these days.

Q: What did your father do?

SCHMIEL: He was a mechanic for Standard Oil, in charge of maintenance. When the tanks would rupture or when things weren't running right in the Number One Refinery, he was a fixer. He could look at a problem and solve it.

Like most people in that era and of that "class," he did not get through high school. My mother did, which in fact was rare at that time. College was an unknown, not even considered by anybody until our third generation came along.

Q: And your mother's people?

SCHMIEL: They were from the same region of Poland originally.

Q: What region is that?

SCHMIEL: Galicia in southern Poland. At various times, it had been swallowed up by the Austrians, Prussians, or the Russians. I think when my ancestors came, Poland didn't exist as a separate nation.

I don't know where my parents met, but it was probably at the local Polish American Club. It was expected that one would marry within the group, i.e. the Polish-Americans. Also, I have recently done some genealogical research, and I discovered that all of my ancestors came from Galicia, so the dating routine in the neighborhoods where they met undoubtedly would have had the undercurrent of a requirement that they date/marry someone whose ancestors were from Galicia and, presumably, spoke Polish with that particular accent.

In our neighborhood we also had Ukrainians, Russians, Slovenians, etc. Each was in its own little group, had its own church.

Q: This was melting pot America.

SCHMIEL: This was more the mosaic America. Intermarriage was rare. My mother was one of eleven children. One of her brothers married a woman who was a Lutheran. The tremors from that were omnipresent. The woman was accepted at family occasions, but there was always some looking askance at her.

Looking forward, when I married Bonnie Elliott, who is a Methodist, in 1969, there was less of a furor, so clearly times had changed.

Q: You were born during World War II. Did your father get into World War II? Or was he too old?

SCHMIEL: He was 35 when the war started, and because he was working at Standard Oil he was exempted because of the importance of the oil refinery and oil-related work.

Q: What was the impact of the war on these ethnic communities?

SCHMIEL: It helped them economically, because they had gone through the Depression in the 1930s, a very difficult time. Most had large families, but they were able to get through it quite well, because one or two had a job. Everyone else was able to work together. There was a very strong family spirit.

The war caused a boom in industrial Cleveland where United States Steel, Republic Steel, Standard Oil, etc. were operating. The economic "bust" in the "rust belt" would come some 30 years later.

My father had a steady job from the late 1930s to 1972, when Number One Refinery was closed because it had become antiquated. He was out of a job and was forced into "early retirement."

Let me add here a vignette about an earlier "bust" period, the Great Depression. My father told me that when, around 1932 he was 26 and out of work, he went to the employment bureau and was told he couldn't have a job since his brother had one and the people had to share. He said that that was the one moment in his life when he was tempted to commit violence on someone, adding that if he had hit the clerk, he would at least have been put in jail and have had three meals a day and a roof over his head! They were clearly desperate times. My father was a very gentle man, but a strong one with a strong sense of family.

Q: What was it like growing up in Cleveland? When did you go to high school?

SCHMIEL: Growing up, the weather was cold, but then it got colder. The summer by contrast was blisteringly hot. We were in the working class, so there was no money for vacations – summers were a time to paint the house or to rest. The idea of traveling somewhere, having sufficient leisure and disposable income to do that was just not possible. This was one of the factors which impelled me to try to enter the Foreign Service.

The local parish had its own grade school, with nuns teaching in every grade. Most of them were from Poland or of Polish ancestry. The attitude in our homes about them was, "Whatever the sisters said or did was right, because God had a direct line to them." We never could complain, because the sisters could not possibly be wrong.

Q: Well that short-circuited things.

SCHMIEL: Then my brother went to St. Ignatius High School, the Jesuit school in Cleveland. So I did that too instead of going to the parish High School, which was mediocre at best. Going to high school with the Jesuits was, in terms of discipline, even greater than with the sisters. In terms of academic vigor, it was a huge leap forward. The Jesuits are great educators. Their thesis is, you learn, or else. So we learned.

Q: Would it have been normal to go up through the parish school system? Or was it a different detour to go?

SCHMIEL: Yes, all but two of the people I graduated from eighth grade with went to the parish school. As for St. Ignatius, we had to take a special test to get in because it was citywide. I was already guaranteed a place in the parish school, but I decided against that. I would often compare notes with my colleagues who stayed at the parish school. It was night and day in terms of academic rigor.

Q: So when did you graduate from high school?

SCHMIEL: 1962

Q: That was after Kennedy was elected President. Did that campaign appear in your consciousness?

SCHMIEL: Sure. I was 18. We used to joke that the Polish-Americans had pictures of two gods on the wall: Jesus and Roosevelt. Roosevelt was very much the savior, you know, with the New Deal and the Democratic Party. You voted Democrat, period.

Obviously, the Kennedy campaign was interesting, but I wouldn't say our family was politically active. The fact that he was, at least nominally, a Catholic was an element of pride.

Q: After high school, you enrolled in St. Francis College, a Catholic institution.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: How did you pick St. Francis?

SCHMIEL: Well, I started looking at the brochures for colleges and applied for scholarships, which was necessary, given our family's limited assets.

So I applied to smaller Catholic schools nearby, St. Vincent's in Pennsylvania, and a couple of others. St. Francis of Loretto, Pennsylvania. gave me a full academic scholarship.

Q: What was the environment like at St. Francis?

SCHMIEL: It was pretty stifling. *In loco parentis* (in the place of a parent) was still quite strong. Academically it wasn't that strong. St. Ignatius was so advanced that the freshman year at St. Francis was to some extent a repeat of what I had already done academically.

It was a true ivory tower in the middle of nowhere. The city of Loretto to this day has a population of 600, and the school still has only about 1200 students.

I began my interest in history there. One of the history professors, John Murphy, asked me in my freshman year if I would like to be his assistant to, among other things, grade papers of my colleagues in the class. I earned some money that way too. He encouraged me toward becoming a history professor.

Q: When you were at St. Francis, Kennedy was assassinated.

SCHMIEL: Yes, I was at the radio station. I had a radio program playing popular and folk music, and I was there when the news came in. I dropped my records in shock.

Q: Was this the campus radio station?

SCHMIEL: Yes, the campus radio station, up in the studio. Obviously it came as a shock, especially at a Catholic school.

Q: You were a DJ (disc jockey) at the radio station. How did that come about?

SCHMIEL: One of my friends had done it and said, "Why don't you come on? We can do a show together." Trying something new was always a good idea.

Q: In 1966, you graduated. What decision did you make then about what you were going to do?

SCHMIEL: Previously, I had applied, at Professor Murphy's suggestion, to go to graduate school, to get my PhD. and become a history professor. This was my life's professional and career goal. I got several offers for assistantships and one for a fellowship.

Ohio State offered me a National Defense Education Act (NDEA) fellowship, which not only paid for the academic side, but also included a living stipend with no responsibilities other than to make progress toward a degree. With an assistantship I would have had to

teach, grade papers, or do other things, and it would have taken much longer to get the degree. Obviously, it was the best deal. Also, it was near home.

Q: So you moved from soup to sandwiches.

SCHMIEL: Well, a Reuben. Columbus was not that far from home, and that was good. The irony was that Professor Murphy was a Notre Dame man, and while Ohio State and others gave me financial incentives, Notre Dame did not even accept me into the program. Professor Murphy was quite embarrassed by that, especially since I was his protégé.

Eventually, I was accepted, perhaps because Professor Murphy contacted them.

Q: Now, this is at the start of the Vietnam War and you were a graduate student. I would think the course work is a little more strenuous now.

SCHMIEL: Yes, graduate school will do that.

Q: Actually, you finished your master's there and you went on for your doctorate at OSU (Ohio State University).

SCHMIEL: No, I did not get a master's degree. For that and for other reasons, the first year was very important.

First, I met my future wife, who was an under-graduate at Ohio State.

Then, in spring 1967, my advisor, Professor Francis Weisenberger, said to me, "You can skip the master's if you want to and just go straight on to the PhD."

Because the fellowship was for three calendar years, if I could complete the Ph.D. in three years, it would be much more economical.

Another fortuitous development that year came when Professor Weisenberger and I discussed the foreign language requirements for the degree. For most departments, candidates had to pass proficiency tests in two languages. However, the previous year the University had changed the requirements, leaving the decision to the advisor. Because I had decided to focus my studies on 19th Century American History, he said I could, if I wished, waive the language requirement.

I had already passed the requirement in French, but I was finding it difficult to pass in Spanish. I had studied Latin for four years in high school, but that wasn't one of the "permitted languages."

Q: But Latin is supposed to help you.

SCHMIEL: It did, in French, which I had taken for two years in college. I had never taken Spanish.

Q: How did you decide to do 19th Century American History?

SCHMIEL: It's hard to say, but as I took my courses I sensed that it was an era of interesting transitions from the colonial to the modern era. I was always interested in the Civil War. It seemed like a field that not many people were going into, which could help when I was searching for a professorship.

Also, Professor Weisenberger was a well-known leader in the field who had many good contacts in universities around the nation, which would be helpful in my future search for a professorship.

Diplomatic History was one of my other possibilities, interestingly enough. That became a secondary field, along with Middle Eastern History.

Q: How did you pick your dissertation topic? And what was it?

SCHMIEL: I was taking a seminar course with Professor Weisenberger, and he gave us a series of topics, one of which was the Congressional career of James Monroe from Oberlin, Ohio. I did the seminar paper and discovered that his brother-in-law, Jacob Dolson Cox, had a prominent career in 19th century America, but that there had never been a dissertation of any length about him. So I suggested that that be my dissertation topic, a biography of an interesting character who spanned and in many ways represented 19th Century America. He was a politician before the Civil War, became a general during the war (despite lacking any military training), and was Governor of Ohio from 1866-8, a member of President Grant's Cabinet, president of the University of Cincinnati and Dean of the University Law School. He also wrote five books about the Civil War, including his memoirs, which are important primary sources for the history of the war.

(I would note here that at the time I thought about getting the dissertation published, but as it turned out it wasn't feasible. Instead, forty years later I picked it up again and re-wrote it extensively, and in March 2014 my biography of Cox, "Citizen-General: Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era," was published by Ohio University Press).

Also Cox bequeathed all of his papers to Oberlin College, which is 45 minutes from Cleveland. So when I did my research, I could drive out in the morning from my parents' home to Oberlin College's archives to do the primary research. I spent my days in the dusty archives, reading papers and taking extensive notes in longhand.

Q: You actually do get your PhD.

SCHMIEL: Yes, in December 1969. It took a little bit longer than three years, but by then I had a teaching position back at St. Francis College.

Q: How did they catch up with you? Or did you catch up with them?

SCHMIEL: I caught up with them. I began looking for teaching positions early in 1969 even as my future wife and I were planning our wedding in July 1969, just as the dissertation was reaching final form. My wife and I were busy typing it on manual typewriters, with carbons. I had written it out first in long hand, just as I had written out all of my research notes. That was the word-processing of that "age."

Q: Yes, and you needed four copies.

SCHMIEL: And the memory was in our heads and not on a disk or anything else, since they didn't exist. I was looking for jobs, but not much was coming up. It was an extremely tough era for job hunting because of the scarcity of professorial positions. At the same time, I had a deferment for the military draft because I was in grad school, but that would end when I got my degree.

So I wrote to my former professors at St. Francis and asked about possible openings, and they said I was welcome to come back and be an assistant professor, beginning in 1969. So three years after I left the school as a graduate, I returned as an assistant professor.

Q: What were you teaching?

SCHMIEL: Western Civilization, Latin America, and just about everything else. Like a Junior Officer in the Foreign Service, the Junior faculty member gets the basic courses. I didn't do American History because they had people who were doing that already.

I arrived in September 1969 to teach, and I got my degree that December. I hired the secretary to the President of the college to type the dissertation in its final form. It had to be letter-perfect and she was a professional secretary. I gave her $250.00 for this job, which was over 500 pages. $250.00 in 1969 is probably worth about $1,000.00 these days, or even more.

Q: You mentioned something earlier. In May 1970, you had the Kent State incident. Did that blow back on your campus? How was it perceived at the time?

SCHMIEL: My brother had gone to Kent, so I had been there previously. A good friend of mine as an undergraduate at St. Francis was a grad student at the time at Kent State. He and his wife were living there in one of the dorms as a dorm supervisor.

He said he was about 100 yards away from the incident. He heard this crack, crack, crack! He went out and saw the chaos, the people running and screaming. Through him, I learned what an awful time that was.

At St. Francis we talked about the incident in class and I told the students about the experiences there.

Q: As you just said, you are ensconced as a history professor here. So why would you take the Foreign Service exam?

SCHMIEL: Towards the end of my third year, the Department leadership told me that since I had not been teaching in my field, they were very leery of giving me tenure.

So they decided that they would not extend the contract beyond the fourth year, but they gave me one year's notice. So I had a full year to plan, which was generous.

This was also a time when my wife was pregnant for the first time. She had been working too, teaching at a local Catholic elementary school.

Then, one day I was going to have lunch with the Director of the campus Career Center. He suggested that I take the Foreign Service test. At the time I had no knowledge of the foreign service, but it sounded like a good alternative choice of career. I signed up for the exam, which I took at Penn State, which is about 60 miles away. And the rest is history.

Q: What did you think of the test?

SCHMIEL: I don't remember much about it, though it was similar to the GREs (Graduate Record Exams) I had taken earlier for entry to graduate school. It emphasized communication, English expression, and a bit of math. I don't think we had to write an essay at the time.

Q: So it was just a straight…

SCHMIEL: It was like a GRE. The worst part was getting up at six o'clock because I had to report by 7:30 in the morning. I had to drive sixty miles, but luckily, even though it was December, there was very little snow that day.

Q: At some point, they told you whether you passed or not.

SCHMIEL: Right, it took about two months in those days. Then I was invited to come down for the oral exam in March in Washington, DC. We were close enough that I could drive down.

The oral exam was one hour as I remember. I was told to report to a specific office in Rosslyn for an interview and was told that they would tell me immediately afterwards whether I was going on to the next step.

At the oral exam, I walked into a room and there were three people, all FSOs. We chatted about what I had been doing, and my upbringing, like an oral history interview. (At some point before this, I had had to write an essay about why I would be an appropriate Foreign Service officer).

We chatted about current issues: foreign policy, domestic policy, etc. After about an hour, they said, "Well, thank you very much. Please go out and have a seat. We'll let you know."

After a few minutes, I heard the door open. They came out and I seem to remember them doing the thumbs-up sign, and I was "in the foreign service"—or at least on my way.

They then said that they would be in touch about next steps: security clearances, medical clearances, etc..

Q: You were actually sworn into the Foreign Service in August 1973.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: A-100 is your first exposure to the Foreign Service as an organization and as an atmosphere. What was your A-100 course like?

SCHMIEL: It really wasn't a very useful course. During it many people talked at us, there were many references to FAMs (Foreign Affairs Manuals), we visited other agencies, and we heard a great deal about the psychology of diplomacy. But we learned next to nothing remotely related to the daily life of a diplomat/FSO, and I really didn't have a solid understanding whatsoever for the Foreign Service by the end of the course.

That in turn was a very valuable lesson because ten years later, I was coordinator for the A-100 course. Just as when I was a professor, I remembered the negative and positive actions of professors in the classroom, and that helped me to become a better one. So, when I was assigned to teach A-100, I vowed that the course would be very different and valuable to the students.

Q: If they ever made me King…

SCHMIEL: I made sure to the extent that I could that my A-100 students would have a much better preparation for a Foreign Service career. .

Q: Even all that good stuff about visas?

SCHMIEL: Well, that was a matter for the consular course, which was equally useless when I entered the Foreign Service.

Q: Separate from?

SCHMIEL: The A-100 course. The consular course too was abstract and theoretical and had little connection to the activities I would be doing as a consular officer.

As a result, for example, when I arrived in Stockholm nine months later to be the Visa Officer, it was the first time I had ever seen a visa machine.

ConGen (Consulate General) Rosslyn, the revised training approach which was begun several years later, includes the kind of practical training I did not have. As a result it is so much better because it's "hands on." The theory is wonderful, but you've got to meld it with the practice. The A-100 course as I taught it and ConGen Rosslyn were vast improvements.

Q: At this time, which A-100 were you in? They have a number.

SCHMIEL: It was 108, from the old Foreign Service Act.

Q: Okay, the 108th class. Who else was in your class? Do you recall?

SCHMIEL: There were some very good people. Bob Gribbin and Gary Usrey, for example. Bob was ambassador twice: Central African Republic and Rwanda. Gary Usrey retired as an Office Director for India. We have stayed good friends. The three of us play golf together frequently.

Richard Roth, who later became the Vice President at NDU (National Defense University), was a classmate who also became an Ambassador, as did Elizabeth Raspolic, who was Ambassador to Gabon.

Q: Out of A-100, how did you get your first assignment?

SCHMIEL: It was open assignments covertly arrived at.

I knew I had to get language training. My French was very weak. My Latin was very strong, but it wasn't going to get me off language probation. I thought I would get a European language. So that's probably why we were given Stockholm.

Q: What other things did you put down? What did you think your interest was at the time?

SCHMIEL: I was primarily interested in Europe and Africa, and that's where I ultimately spent most of my career.

Q: With the assignment as the junior officer in Stockholm came language training.

SCHMIEL: Language training yes, and consular training. Five months of Swedish. That was very good.

Q: So you can go to Minnesota now.

SCHMIEL: Yes. Our teacher was an interesting woman. Her mother was Swedish. Her husband was Ned Beach. If you go to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, you will come to Beach Hall, which is named after Ned and his father, who were naval historians, as well as senior naval officers. Ned wrote many, many books, including Run Silent, Run Deep. He captained The Nautilus submarine that went under the North Pole. He also was President Eisenhower's military aide, and while there he created the "nuclear football," the methodology whereby the president could launch nuclear war if he so decided.

Ingrid was a very good teacher. She was a little old-fashioned, though. After we arrived in Sweden, when I used some of the expressions she taught us, people would say, "My grandmother used to say those things, but we don't say that any more."

So I had to learn a few new expressions. Thankfully, it was a pretty easy language to learn and I picked it up quite quickly.

Q: You arrived in Stockholm in May 1974.

SCHMIEL: A few weeks after my father died. That was traumatic. Our year and a half old son didn't really want to move, but first we had moved to Virginia for training, and now, when he was not quite two, we were on our way to Sweden. . When my father died, we had to go to Cleveland for three days to help out with the family, the funeral, and the estate, and then move again, so that was an additionally hard time for little David.

Q: How did one get to post in the mid-1970s?

SCHMIEL: We flew directly from Cleveland to New York, then London, and then Stockholm. Again, it was traumatic for an almost two-year old. He wasn't happy.

Q: You were assigned to the Consular Section for your first Foreign Service tour. How many people were in the Section? How busy was it?

SCHMIEL: There were three Americans and ten foreign service nationals. One FSO did non-immigrant visas, one the immigrant visas, and one was a supervising consular officer who did American Citizen Services and a variety of other things. It was busy in the summer; slow the rest of the year.

I came in the summer, and that's the height of travel season. The first day I walked into the office I saw four days worth of incoming mail that had not been opened yet. Almost everything was done by mail.

This was not a country where we were going to have visa fraud, so that was not the issue. The issue was volume. There was a staff of four foreign service nationals working on non-immigrant visas.

Having been a bit discouraged at the sight of the unopened visa applications, I then went to another pile of documents and letters and asked, "What's this here?" The response was that "Well, we have a backlog of inquiries, probably about 300-400 of them. We respond to those only when we have time, maybe in October."

I said, looking at both of these backlogs, "We have a management challenge here."

Speaking of management challenges, one of the first things I learned was that signing Eugene David Schmiel on every visa was not a really good idea. So my signature got shorter and shorter. E.D. Schmiel became the norm, but I signed every one, as we were required to do then.

Another management challenge I found after about a month was that the visa processing involved too many unnecessary steps, and I streamlined the process so that it saved an hour a day of one person's work time, which she could then dedicate to more useful functions.

Then I looked at the inquiries which had not been answered for weeks. They were all essentially the same type of questions., e.g. how do I get a visa, how long can I stay, how do I get a student visa, where do I get travel information, etc.
I said, "Look, let's make up a checklist of all the answers to these same frequently-answered questions (FAQs)." The staff helped me do translations of my American English answers, and soon we had a checklist of about 15 answers, beginning: "In answer to your inquiry, see the checked box below."

I said to the staff the new approach would be to decide which was the appropriate answer, check the box, and mail a response the same day.

Previously the staff had been writing individual letters to each person, which was a huge waste of time and money. Within three months, we had zero backlog on inquiries.

Then, we instituted an automated telephone information line so people could get visa information from a recording instead of from a person who had to relate the same information repeatedly. That person now could do many other things. It was a major reform in time management.

Finally, and most importantly, we dealt with the backlog of applications in the summer. I made it my objective to ultimately process every application that came into us in the morning, by mail, and have it returned that evening. It took most of the summer to work off the backlog, and we had to put in some overtime to do it, but now that people were not spending/wasting their time on minutia, they could focus on what was important.

So when the next crunch period came, beginning the next May, we had gotten into that rhythm. There were no more backlogs, no more piles of paper. And no more overtime, saving Uncle Sam a bit of money in the bargain.

In sum, it was a major management challenge, and within six months the reforms were achieved.

Q: This is the junior officer in the whole office?

SCHMIEL: Only in the Visa section.

Q: I was thinking if you had to clear it with your boss or something like that.

SCHMIEL: Oh yes, sure. Mike Hancock was in charge of the visa section. He did immigrant visas. I told him what I was doing, and he approved my reforms. He had been doing Non-Immigrant visas before I arrived, so in fact some of the problems had taken place "on his watch." But he was receptive to my changes.

Q: Were there any interesting non-Swedish non-immigrant visa cases?

SCHMIEL: Yes, there are a couple described in the book my wife and I wrote, "Welcome Home: Who Are You? Tales of a Foreign Service Family.". There was the Pole who ate his visa application. There were a couple of others.

Q: Tell that story again.

SCHMIEL: Do I have to read it?

Q: No, just summarize it.

SCHMIEL: I'll try to remember here. Let's see. "A Visa for Wladziu," that's it.

Sweden has always been a country open to refugees. These days, they have many Iranians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Ethiopians, and Eritreans.

In the 60's and 70's Sweden had many refugees from Eastern Europe who had been, either because they had to be or they wanted to be, members of the Communist Party.

The visa laws in those days were quite rigid. If you had been in the party, you were ineligible for a visa. You could be given a waiver of the ineligibility for a tourist visa, and many were given out because these people had been in Sweden for five or six years, established themselves, spoke Swedish. My Swedish was good enough that I knew whether they could speak the language or not.

(When I came back from Sweden, I tested at four-plus in the language, having tested at three-plus going out. In the office, I rarely spoke English because it was good for me to practice with the Swedes, the people who applied, reading the newspaper, and everything else)

So in a typical case, I would say, "I can't give the visa straightforwardly because of your membership in the Communist Party. However, we can get you a waiver of the ineligibility. We have to contact the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Frankfurt at the regional office. We have to send the papers to them. If they did not object, we could issue the visa waiver."

So this fellow said, "No, no. It will be on my record that I checked that box on the application and signed that I was a member of the Communist Party. This was the most terrible thing I ever had to do. I was forced into it."

I said, "Yes, I know."

He said, "I don't want that."

So he reached across my desk and grabbed the application. I said, "No, you have to give it back to me."

"No, this cannot be on the record."

And he ate it. He tore it up and threw it in his mouth. He ate the application so it could never be on the record.

I told him, "You can't have a visa now."

He said, “I don’t care. It will no longer be on the record that I was in the Communist Party. I will never have to say that again.”

I called the Marine security guard, and the marine escorted him out. He wasn’t really dangerous, but to say the least, he was emotional about it.

Q: Let’s stop and introduce the fact that you have put down some of your recollections.

The book is called, Welcome Home: Who Are You? Tales of a Foreign Service Journal. It does have some recollections. When was that published?

SCHMIEL: In 1998, soon after I retired. My wonderful wife had done a couple of stories for the Foreign Service Journal, and had them published. I thought we could build on that, so I started to put together some ideas and some thoughts. I wrote some stories and she wrote a few more. The vignettes are totally non-substantive, but they are of some human interest, recollections of how normal people in the Foreign Service react to their living situation overseas.

Q: Speaking of human interest, what was the embassy like? I think you had a politically appointed ambassador at that time.

SCHMIEL: We had two or three while I was there. When I arrived we didn’t have an ambassador, but the first one we had was Robert Strausz-Hupé, who was a professor well acquainted with Mr. Kissinger, who became Secretary of State six days after I joined the Foreign Service.

The Ambassador was in his 70s, but still a very capable and intelligent man, though he tended to be forgetful. After Stockholm, he became Ambassador to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and to Turkey.

Q: Stockholm was a pretty nice place to live.

SCHMIEL: Yes, it was.

Also, about nine months and a week after we arrived, our daughter was born there. It was one of the great memories of Stockholm to bring home. This was one of the ideas of this book, Welcome Home, Who Are You? We went off as three, but came back as four, but very different people. We weren’t recognizable, nor was the America we came back to recognizable. That’s the whole point of the Foreign Service -- you change so much.

Q: Going back to the embassy, for a moment. If the ambassador was forgetful, does that mean the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) had to pick up a little extra load? Did you see that?

SCHMIEL: Somewhat. Again, I was down at the bottom of the line, the Visa Officer, though I was the only State officer who spoke Swedish well. I was quite frustrated by that.

Q: The Political Section guys couldn’t?

SCHMIEL: They did, but not really well. And I was rarely used. That’s the way it was.

Yes, the DCM picked up a bit, but I really wasn’t that aware of what was going on beyond my narrow focus.

When Fred Hassett came in to head up the Consular Section the second year, he changed a lot of things. He wanted to do nonimmigrant visas, so I got to do the whole gamut of experiences in consular. This was good. I got a feel for the whole operation.

Q: Although you were starting your family, did you have an opportunity to travel around the country?

SCHMIEL: Some. USIA (United States Information Service) used me to give speeches at round tables and other groups. I would go off for a weekend and they would host me to give a speech about the United States. I got to do it in Swedish, which they found very interesting. I did the whole dialogue in Swedish and that broke the stereotype that Americans don't learn languages.

Q: This is the whole Vietnam period. In fact, Saigon falls in April 1975. You're talking to audiences that are aware.

SCHMIEL: With Vietnam, there were many military deserters in Sweden, perhaps 5,000?

While we were there, President Ford announced the amnesty for deserters. They had to come in and they would be given amnesty. During my time, not one came in or accepted the amnesty, because they said, "Amnesty means we admit guilt, admit the crime, and you are absolving us of the consequences. We are not going to do that, because it was not a crime. It was the right thing to do."

The few who did come in to talk about it refused to comply.

Q: You were in Sweden when the next presidential election came by, which the Carter people won. Did that impact the Swedish environment? The ambassador would change, I suppose.

SCHMIEL: I think the ambassador obviously knew he would be leaving. Everyone was very curious about what Carter would be like. To say the least, he was an unknown. The year before, he was "Jimmy Who?"

Q: You had leave between this assignment and the next assignment. You are going back to Cleveland, to family?

SCHMIEL: Yes, and they all said, "Welcome home. Who are you?"

Q: Now, your mother had come out and visited you.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: How did she respond to being overseas?

SCHMIEL: It was a great experience for her. Actually, there's a story. Apparently, her birth had never been registered, or they couldn't find the records.

Q: So, if she were running for President…

SCHMIEL: So they had to find some documents for her to get her passport. The consular chief's (Richard Kautsky) intervention via a cable helped immensely.

Q: This is the third start on our conversation with Gene Schmiel, who is still in Stockholm. You were making a comment about the ambassador.

SCHMIEL: Ambassador Strausz-Hupé was quite conservative. He was a refugee from Austria, so German was his first language. When he communicated with the Prime Minister of Sweden, at the time that was Olaf Palme, their conversations were not in English, but in German. I think Palme's English and his German were equally strong. So I thought that was a kind of interesting lesson. Palme at the time was one of the most vibrant and active opponents of the Vietnam War.

We had occasional protests at the embassy, which were very civilized. Five thousand people would march for an hour. They would come to the embassy and chant, raise up their signs. Ice cream vendors would come along and sell ice cream cones. It was kind of a frolic and a festival. After an hour and a half, they would all go home. Everyone was happy. Everyone had checked off the box of protest.

A few years later, a person self-immolated himself in the parking lot right in front of the embassy in protest of the war.

Speaking of self-immolation, that brings back another memory.

The West German Embassy – the Swedes had an East German Embassy too – was right next to us, probably 50 yards away. During that time, it was the height of influence by and fear of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, German extremists.

One day in November, there was an alarm in our embassy, and the RSO and Marines told us that the embassy was shutting down and we all had to leave and go home.

As we were streaming out and as I was getting into my car, a marine guard told me that it appeared that the Baader-Meinhof had taken possession of the West German Embassy next door.

We all got out, went home and turned on the television. At that time, Sweden had two stations, and as I was listening to the Swedish commentary on one station, which had a camera at the embassy site, I saw a minor explosion at the embassy.

As it turned out, one of the bombers had mixed up his wires and blew himself and a couple of colleagues up while trying to set the charge. The police came in and captured the others. It was not as terrible an incident as it might have been. That drove home the threat of terrorism early on, even in peaceful Sweden.

Q: You've got to watch out for the amateurs.

SCHMIEL: I remember the security at the embassy when we first arrived was rather minimal – a stark contrast to later years. You walked in the front door and there was a marine behind a desk. If you wanted to get into the embassy, you had merely to push open a small gate. It was as much a barrier to anyone as the old subway barriers. If you could hop over two feet, you were in the embassy and free to move around.

After this incident, security was beefed up considerably. It was an early lesson on the difficult times to come.

Q: Earlier we were talking about your mother's observations when she visited you overseas.

SCHMIEL: So she got her birth certificate and finally got her passport. It helped that the senior consular officer at the embassy, Dick Kautsky, sent a cable to the department to facilitate this.

She came to visit and stayed for nearly three months. She was helping with our son David, and she was there when our daughter Jen was born. She had a great time.

At the time, my brother was working in Zweibrucken, Germany, for the U.S. army. He came up for the baptism of our daughter. Then our mother went and visited with him for a week in Germany, and they flew home.

While my mother was with us, I learned that there were special weekend trips to Poland from Stockholm, and I saw this as a great opportunity for both of us to see our "motherland." My mother was agreeable, but she modestly said that she would not be of much help in translating because her Polish had become weak over time. In fact my mother was still almost fluent.

We had a great time. The supervision by the Polish authorities was surprisingly light – we had tours and such, but weren't forced to be in a group. We wandered around the city looking at Soviet-style life in Warsaw at the time, which was, to say the very least, very dismal.

I remember we got into a cab and my mother was telling the driver that I was an American diplomat. I asked her not to say that because he would presume I was CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

Q: She was proud.

SCHMIEL: She was proud, but…

When my wife and I returned to Warsaw as tourists about 35 years later, we stayed in a hotel near to the one where my mother and I had stayed. The changes in post-Soviet Warsaw were enormous.

Q: That was pretty expansive of her to do that traveling.

SCHMIEL: Yes, my mother was open to new experiences. She was the only one of her family that had ever gone back to the Old Country, as we used to call it, to see the sights, though actually our roots were not in Warsaw, but in the Krakow region down in the south.

She said that one of the interesting memories of that visit was that plastic bags were treasured. For some reason, she had some in her purse.. There weren't any there, so people wanted to buy them so they could have a plastic bag to put things into.

Q: In terms of expanding the insights of the American public, you returned home for home leave between this assignment and the next one. You probably brought your photos and your experiences.

SCHMIEL: And our daughter.

Q: You were saying you left as three and came back as four. How did the family see you?

SCHMIEL: As strangers, as very different people. They didn't understand what we were doing. The curiosity lasted about a minute, because they had no context. Another country, diplomacy, Foreign Service, you might as well have been talking about Sanskrit.

When we told them what we did, the response was, "Okay, fine. And by the way, did you know that so-and-so got divorced. And by the way, we have a party coming up and how about those local sports teams!"

Q: I remember coming back for that first home leave with three or four trays of slides, ready to really show everybody where we were in Southeast Asia. Grandma had two questions: Did they have water? And did they have sanitation and plumbing? Once those questions were answered, she left.

SCHMIEL: Right, that's it. Did the toilets flush?

Q: Your next assignment…

SCHMIEL: I should say that my relatives were interested in the fact that our next assignment was in Durban, in South Africa. In June that year were the Soweto riots, so South Africa was in the mainstream of news because of the rioting. People were very concerned about security. They didn't know the word "apartheid," but they knew what South Africa was about, more or less. They were worried that people were going to be roaming through the streets and killing everybody.

Q: How did you come to this assignment at the Consulate in Durban?

SCHMIEL: Even to that point, it was "open assignments, covertly arrived at." I had no idea what was available. I sent in some ideas. And they said, "How would you like to go to Durban? There's a wonderful position here. South Africa is an interesting place. You will be able to do a variety of things. It's a consular position, but there are only three people, so you could do political and economic work also."

There were four posts at the time in South Africa: Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria, and Johannesburg. I didn't think I really had a choice, but it did sound interesting, to say the least; and besides, the Carter Administration said it was going to put a significant emphasis on Africa policy.

Q: For background purposes, why were there so many consulates in South Africa? What did each represent?

SCHMIEL: Pretoria was the capital, and where the embassy was located. However, while the ambassador, the DCM, and two political officers were based in Pretoria, which was the executive capital, they all moved to Cape Town for several months each year for the parliamentary session, reflecting the division between the Afrikaners and the English. Those officers had two sets of residences.

Johannesburg was the business capital, Durban was the major port, so each got an office. Durban was also very different ethnically because the population was primarily English, Zulu, and Indian. It had no real power politically, because the Afrikaners were the ruling power and there were few of them in Natal Province.

Q: Actually, the Carter Administration put a great deal of emphasis on South Africa, apartheid, and the whole situation. In fact, I interviewed Vice President Mondale at one point, and he said that was the one thing that they were very focused on.

SCHMIEL: We knew that and that is why it made it more appealing to be going there.

Q: What did you understand your basic assignment was?

SCHMIEL: It was a consular position, but because it was small and the consul general, Jim Farber, told me that the number two position had been empty for three months, I would be able to do a wide variety of work.

For the first six or eight months, I got to do economic, commercial, and administrative work. I also followed Indian politics. In Natal Province, that was very important. That's where Mahatma Gandhi got his start, where his education in injustice really began.

Q: It's a large Indian community?

SCHMIEL: Yes, it was over a million in that era. It's probably two million by now.

Q: So, 50 percent of the population or more?

SCHMIEL: Oh no, this is Zulu country. So Indians may have been 15 or 20 percent of the population. The Zulus were the consul general's contacts. I had the Indians, the second-most populous.

Q: And what did the Indian community look like? Who did you talk to?

SCHMIEL: They were divided. Many of them were active in the ANC (African National Congress), Mandela's party. The ANC was underground at the time, i.e. it was illegal, but many people were sympathetic to the ANC.

I got to know many business people, who were restricted to the Indian business area as part of the Group Areas Act, which also restricted where they could live. Many were extremely wealthy. But many others were very radical, more radical than some of the Africans.

Officially, the "Europeans" were the only permanent residents of South Africa. The Africans had all emigrated from somewhere else, according to "official policy." Therefore, they could never be South Africans, so the government created the homelands system. There were 13 of them, and the most prominent were KwaZulu, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Transkei.

According to South African law (a fine example where reality was ignored), each African ethnic group was going to have its homeland, a separate independent country within South Africa. They would be citizens of that country. They could come to work in South Africa with a pass, but they could not be citizens of South Africa.

On the other hand, the Indians, official doctrine said, were visitors. They were ultimately going to "go home." Therefore, they too could not be permanent residents. This despite the fact that some of the Indians I knew were third or fourth generation.

Then there were the Coloureds, those of what was called "mixed race."

Q: What kind of travel passports did they have?

SCHMIEL: They had South African passports, but always limited and always with the understanding that this was temporary. Where a million of these people, the Indians, were going to go and how you were going to get them out were questions few people focused on.

The original Indians had come to cut sugar cane and to help build railroads. They were imported from the Empire into the Union of South Africa for labor. They brought their wives sometimes, and nature took over. They cut the cane because, reportedly, the resident Africans could not be "induced" to do that kind of work.

The other group, the fourth group, was the Coloureds, the mixed race people, who in fact were the only true indigenous people of South Africa.

One of the interesting things about our tour in South Africa, especially under the Carter Administration, is that we were under instruction to be critical of the government and government policy, publicly as well as privately. It was very unusual.

As a result, I used to say to the Afrikaners, "You know, the only real indigenous people here are the Coloureds. All you others, you came from somewhere else. They started here."

They didn't like to hear that, but it was true. So if they too could not be "real" South African citizens, where would they go? This was their home. Some of the Coloured leaders used to joke, "Yes, we're Coloured, but about a third of the parliament is Coloured too. They just won't admit it."

How did one determine to which group he belonged? "Race Classification Boards" decided. If there was a dispute as to which group you were in, you would come before the board. They would look at you. They would get testimony from your relatives or friends that you were living as a White, or as a Coloured, or as an Asian, or whatever, so you could be classified. It would determine what kind of job you could have, where you could live, who you could marry, what school you could go to, everything else. A very strange place – certainly "Orwellian."

Allan Drury wrote a book, A Very Strange Society, which was very accurate.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

SCHMIEL: It was Bill Bowdler, a career ambassador.

We in Durban didn't have that much contact with him. However, at one point, after a year, I was advised that all of the embassy's four-person political section were either transferring or would be away on home leave for an extended period. So Jim Farber, the consul general, and Harvey Nelson, who was the DCM, worked out a deal and they sent me and the family to Pretoria to become a one-man political section for about six weeks. It was a great experience.

Q: In terms of your own career development, that's expanding your skills.

SCHMIEL: Yes, absolutely, especially in a country like South Africa under apartheid.

Q: What was the relationship between the consulates and the embassy? Were you in cable communication?

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: Or were you in one of those situations too where the consulate couldn't send out a report? Did they send it through the embassy?

SCHMIEL: No. We were given independence. We were sending out our own cables, receiving our own cables also. I remember this because one of the more interesting experiences I had before I went out to Durban was that I was trained to be the back-up communicator.

With three weeks of training, I learned how to do send and receive, encrypt and decrypt, etc. It was a skill that I've never used again, but it was obviously necessary with that small a post.

Q: This is, number one, a hotbed issue for this administration. You are there. Do you recall any particular milestones in the implementation of the Carter Administration policies?

SCHMIEL: Not beyond laying the foundation ultimately for Rhodesia, but that was much later.

Q: I supposed that the congressional trips would go to the embassy and not come to you guys?

SCHMIEL: Only once in a while. Congressman Charlie Diggs, an African-American who was Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee in the House, came out periodically. Most didn't.

Q: How did the foreign service system select your next post?

SCHMIEL: I seem to recall that by then we had the microfiche system through which one could actually look and see what was coming, see what was available for the bidding process. You could then "bid" on positions with relevant assurance that the openings you opted for did in fact exist. Do you remember this?

Q: That sounds familiar, yes.

SCHMIEL: It was clearly time to come back to Washington. I had had two tours overseas. I had been granted tenure, so it was time in the normal progression to become a desk officer on the third tour. Obviously, since the Africa Bureau had become very prominent, I said I would be interested in a desk. So at first I was assigned as the Namibia desk officer.

At the time, Namibia was hot because the South Africans were in there fighting "on the border," and the Cubans were active in the neighboring Angola conflict. I was pleased because I thought it would be an interesting post.

A month later, I got a cable saying that my assignment had been changed – I was now going to be the Rhodesia desk officer.

Rhodesia was important at the time also, so I was agreeable.

Q: When did you return to Washington?

SCHMIEL: It would have been the summer of 1978. We came back and bought a house. One of the lessons that I carried over to my next assignment when I was teaching A-100

was that the first thing after saying hello to the new A-100 people was to tell them, "Buy real estate."

We could have bought a house before we went to our first post and did not. That was a time when prices were on their swift incline. So we bought a nice house in 1978, but we could have had a much nicer place if we had bought earlier.

As for my new responsibilities, having lived in South Africa and having been in the region and done a little traveling, I was prepared for the regional issues. However, what I was not prepared for was how the system worked, how the State Department functioned.

I had never worked in the department, so the bureaucratic processes were *terra incognito*. Everything from clearing a cable, the difference between an action memo, a briefing memo, an info memo, and an ExecSec (Executive Secretariat) memo were all unknown to me. I had no idea about the procedures or processes of the department. In A-100, I had learned none of this and I didn't have any idea – which is why I included it in A-100 when I taught the course so that future junior officers would know what to expect.

If I had come back to be the desk officer for Cameroon, I would have had a leisurely month or two to learn all these things. In 1978 with Rhodesia, in the fifth year of the civil war, there was no time. The baptism of fire was intense.

The first couple of months, I fumbled around. Deputy Office Director (and later Ambassador and Assistant Secretary) George Moose and others had been working the issue for so long that they spoke in a shorthand of context. I didn't have the context. I gradually picked up on what had happened to this point, what had not happened, who were the wheelers and dealers, and what were the nuances and intricacies of the policy. It was a difficult transition.

Q: Can you give us a sense of what the office looked like and the bureau looked like when you arrived?

SCHMIEL: We had seven people in southern African affairs. Herb Keyser was the Director, but he only stayed about two or three months, then moved onto something else. Then Paul Hare moved in as Director for most of the next two years. Lou McFarland supervised South Africa, Namibia, and a few others. George Moose did Rhodesia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and a few other countries. One person did economics. It was an extremely busy office.

Rhodesia was hot. The war was going on. There was press guidance to be written three times a week minimum. It was so busy that there was an assistant Rhodesia desk officer who did mainly Congressional and public inquiries, and that kind of thing.

In part as a recompense, they instituted a system whereby I received 18 percent extra pay because the presumption was that I would be working extensive overtime. In fact, I almost always worked 10 or 12-hours every day, and half days on weekends.

Q: Just to put things into context, the Office of South African Affairs, AF/S, covered South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, and Southern Rhodesia. So you were the epicenter of the whole African policy focus. So there would be something breaking in the press from time to time.

SCHMIEL: Every five minutes.

Q: And you would have to start your day off reading the papers and what not to prepare your press guidance for noon.

SCHMIEL: Right. I would get up in the morning, get the newspaper, and look at it hoping that there was nothing about Rhodesia in it. I knew if there was, the press guidance had to be prepared by 9:30, so it could be circulated around for clearance. Not that we ever had much new to say. The press guidance always said, "We deplore the latest act of violence by – fill in the blank. We urge all sides to get together. We emphasize that

the Anglo-American peace process (the joint ongoing effort at the time) should be accepted by both sides together for a peaceful resolution of this conflict for the benefit of the people of Zimbabwe."

I wrote guidance with those thoughts probably 175 times. Each time it had to be different, but the fundamental concept was always the same. After a while I really had nothing new and fresh to say, only repeated that we hoped the war would stop, that the two sides would resolve their differences, etc.

Q: Now being the epicenter of the Bureau of African Affairs (AF) focus, you must have had pretty constant interaction with the AF front office.

SCHMIEL: Dick Moose was the Assistant Secretary. Bill Harrop was the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. I got to know them very well. We were busy all the time.

My predecessor as the Rhodesia desk officer was a fellow named Jeff Davidow, later Assistant Secretary for Latin America and Ambassador to Mexico.

I used to joke that they chose me for that desk because I was the only person physically even close to being as big as Jeff. Jeff is six feet, eight inches tall and about 300 pounds. He is an imposing figure.

So yes, we were up with Dick Moose, Bill Harrop, and these others frequently. Andy Young, the Ambassador to the UN (United Nations), was also a very important policy player. Don McHenry, a professor, was the Assistant Secretary for IO (International Organizations), and that office was a key player on Namibia policy because that country was still, officially, under the League of Nations/UN mandate system from World War One's Versailles treaty.

Q: One of the key jobs that a desk officer does in Washington is coordinate with other agencies. There were sanctions and all kinds of things going on. How did that impact you?

SCHMIEL: You know, not that much interaction with other agencies. There was no Rhodesian Embassy; however there was a Rhodesian Information Office, which despite the sanctions, still existed in Washington because Congress insisted. I was the only person allowed to speak to the Rhodesian Information Officer. I had to be off-site somewhere. I saw him rarely. This was a very touchy issue because of the sanctions that had been placed on Rhodesia.

Q: The peace process was Anglo-American?

SCHMIEL: Anglo-American – at first.

Q: You must have liaised with the UK (United Kingdom) Embassy on a fairly frequent basis.

SCHMIEL: Yes, very much so. Representatives from the British embassy would come over to see us or we would go over there.

Because of the importance, everybody from President Carter on down was involved in this. I was the desk officer, but I probably was one of the minor actors. George Moose, who ultimately became Assistant Secretary for Africa, was obviously a rising star at the time.

For our policy, by far the most important change came when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Great Britain later in my tenure. She ended the cooperation with us, noting, in effect, "Thank you Americans for your help in this process. This is our colony. We'll take over now. If we need you, we'll let you know. No more Anglo-American negotiations."

The British Embassy would still liaise with us, but we were no longer partners in the peace process.

Q: At what time did that unfold?

SCHMIEL: Let's see: mid-1979. I don't remember exactly when she was first elected, but it was a signal moment. It changed things.

I should mention here one of the more interesting experiences I had when on the desk came when it was decided that if we were going to move things along in the peace process, we had to speak to Ian Smith directly. He had by then set up an interim government with three African leaders: Bishop Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sithole and Chief Jeremiah Chirau, one of the traditional chiefs. Smith hoped to get international acceptance without having to deal with the two rebel groups which were fighting his government, ZANU and ZAPU.

We had been under considerable pressure from Congress to recognize Smith's new government or at least to give him and his colleagues a visa to visit the U.S. It was then decided, in considerable part because of the congressional pressure, that we would have Ian Smith come to the United States so that we could explain our policy directly to him in the hope that we might persuade him to deal seriously with the two leading rebel leaders, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo.

Inviting Smith to the United States was a violation of U.S and international UN sanctions. We publicly agreed that it was a technical violation, but that it was important to have him here so we can talk to him directly. Of course we were also under pressure from Congress, primarily Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, to negotiate directly with Smith and to disregard Mugabe and Nkomo.

So as I recount in our book, during the intense preparations, which lasted about a week, at one point, I went to George Moose. I said, "George, we've been doing this for the last three days, probably 15 hours a day. I don't think I've had more than eight hours of sleep total. I am so exhausted that I can hardly stand up. I am going to go home."

This was at noon. I went home and slept for 24 hours. I had never been so exhausted in my life. I had always been somewhat athletic, but Ian Smith wore me out.

Q: This was along the lines of doing the papers and the itineraries?

SCHMIEL: The papers, the itinerary, and the agonies of breaking sanctions. The Carter Administration, the purists, got into power because of Nixon breaking the law, and Watergate. And here we were breaking international law. The UN understood. Everybody understood, but nevertheless, it was a violation.

Q: But this decision was made at the highest levels.

SCHMIEL: Yes, but it was still an agonizing one, with the practical step of doing a face-to-face with Smith.

So as I recount in the book, I remember the day before Smith was coming, we were making some last-minute arrangements and someone said, "Well, they are going to drive up to the C Street entrance of the State Department. Who is going to greet them?"

Normally with a head of state or a head of government you have at least the Under Secretary or the Deputy Secretary coming down to do this, but this was the head of government of a rebel, UN-sanctioned state. So I piped up and said, "Well, I'll greet them."

Everyone agreed that having a person so many layers down greet them, would be a diplomatic slap. I thought this would be interesting, a good experience.

So the next day, I had my 24 hours of sleep and I was refreshed. I went to the "C" Street entrance and informed the guards that I would be greeting the Smith group. They drove up, Mr. Smith and all the others. I introduced myself and escorted them to the Secretary's special elevator. We all went up and chatted for about two or three minutes, until they were all called into the meeting, which I did not attend.

As I recount in the story, my relatives said, "Hey, we were watching television last night and we saw you on CBS, shaking hands with Ian Smith and all these others at the State Department. It was a big TV story."

I had missed it of course, because I was busy doing other things. Walter Cronkite said that Smith was greeted by a lower level official at the State Department. My comment was – I had been promoted a couple of days before from low level to lower level. Obviously, Walter Cronkite got the word. My 15 seconds of fame!

Q: Who was the note taker?

SCHMIEL: George Moose, who was playing a much more active role than I was.

Q: So there's an interesting MemCon (foreign service speak for Memorandum of Conversation).

SCHMIEL: Oh yes. Really, it was inconsequential. Smith was a very skilled fellow. Like North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, he played a weak hand very skillfully. He never offered an idea. He always waited for you to do so, so he could pick it apart.

Old Smitty died just a few years ago. He never left Zimbabwe.

Q: Did that meeting move anything along?

SCHMIEL: No, not really. There was a lot of back and forth, and diplomatic fencing. Smith thought he had a stronger hand, especially because he had very strong backing on the Hill. Senator Helms's perspective was the one that the South Africans and Smith had: That was these were anti-communists. They hated the Soviet Union. The Cold War was still on. We should support them because they were anti-Soviet Union. All the rest of it was less important.

Q: Earlier, you made the comment that there was a Rhodesian Interest Group.

SCHMIEL: The Rhodesian Information Office was a one-man office.

Q: This was required by the congress. So here in this very delicate and interesting diplomatic problem, you had the U.S. legislature playing a major role.

SCHMIEL: They had been pushing to let Smith into the United States for these discussions. He went to Capitol Hill too for discussions with the Senate and House people, his supporters, Jesse Helms being pre-eminent. They told Smith, "Don't worry about this administration. The American people support you because you hate the Soviets, and that's more important."

So Smith was bucked up by that unfortunately, because it wasn't true.

Perhaps a parallel given your East Asia experience was the congressional pressure to have the Taiwanese President come to speak at Cornell, and the flaps that led to. Congress pushed so hard that this administration gave in on Smith, with the justification that it could help to move the peace process along. But it didn't.

Q: And it probably helped to quiet the congressional opposition.

SCHMIEL: No one ever quieted Jesse Helms.

Q: It's an interesting interaction between the Executive and Legislative branches in the foreign policy area. This is in 1979, so that was a Labour government. When Thatcher comes in, she says, "Step back."

SCHMIEL: We'll take over, thank you very much.

Q: So you got to get some sleep?

SCHMIEL: Yes, I got some sleep. Things were much calmer because we were not in the middle of the peace process. By then, I understood what was going on. My baptism by fire was finally over. So it was a bit calmer because I was more confident.

Pete de Vos came in as the Deputy Director. Later he was ambassador twice in African countries. He died recently.

Q: It's interesting to note parallel events at that same time. In February, Ambassador Dubs is killed in Kabul. In November, the American Embassy in Tehran is seized. So 1979 becomes quite an interesting year.

SCHMIEL: Mary Ann Dubs was one of my A-100 students later on, Ambassador Dubs' wife. She joined the Foreign Service and was in one of my A-100 classes.

Q: That's the Foreign Service taking care of its own sometimes. You see that in other cases.

The Zimbabwe assignment: when does that end?

SCHMIEL: In mid 1980, soon after Mrs. Thatcher and Lord Carrington, her foreign minister, helped to create Zimbabwe and stop the civil war. Carrington hosted the talks in London, and they really moved things along quite well. They got Smith to agree to a transition, to a new constitution.

This is where I was busy because we had to prepare for setting up an embassy. We had Jeff Davidow, who had been a Congressional Fellow, come back to the department. He was assigned to Pretoria, but in fact was in Salisbury, living in a hotel, liaising with the British office that had never closed. We had an embassy building and residences, which we had never sold, wisely, in Salisbury. He was checking those out. When we reopened relations, we would have an embassy and residences still there.

So Jeff was spending 80 percent of his time in Salisbury. We never announced this. It never leaked, until now, that he was there. That would have been controversial because there were still sanctions. He would send his messages back through the British system, and the British Embassy would bring over his cables.

I recount this in the book in the section in our book about Foreign Service humor. One incident came when Jeff, who had a great sense of humor, met with Joshua Nkomo. Remember that Jeff is six feet, eight inches tall, and weighed about 300 pounds. Nkomo was about five feet, eight inches, and weighed about 400 pounds. The ground shook when these two were in the room.

In his report, Jeff said, "I went to shake his hand and Nkomo presented me with four fat sausages masquerading as fingers."

Q: So, Davidow was put in place, authorized to talk to everybody, and assist however he could to make the American presence felt.

SCHMIEL: Right. Later when I made a second regional trip we got together. I had been in South Africa, and I was in Botswana when they announced the agreement in London. Don Norland was the Ambassador for Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. His son Dick was one of my A-100 students, and later became an Ambassador.

When I went to Rhodesia to meet and work with Jeff, I of course was not officially there. As I said to him when we met, "I'm not here Jeff." "I'm not here either," he responded.

We told the Rhodesians that I was coming. My passport had to have an extra sheet so I didn't get a Rhodesian visa stamp on my diplomatic passport; I got it on another one.

To back up, the Brits did a fine job on resolving the Rhodesian issue, which was helped by the fact that everyone was tired after seven years of war. They knocked heads together. They sent Lord Soames, who was the son-in-law of Winston Churchill, back to Salisbury, so that the Crown was once again in charge. The Smith regime was over. Until there was a transition, Britain resumed control. The UN later lifted the sanctions.

Independence I think was in April or May 1980, within a few weeks of the end of my tenure as the desk officer.

It was decided that the new desk officer, the fellow who was taking my place, Bob Frasure, would attend the independence ceremonies. Sadly Bob was later killed in an accident in Bosnia. Before then he was Ambassador to Estonia.

Q: Yes, that's where he was killed, in Kosovo.

SCHMIEL: Yes, the car slipped off the road.

Anyway, he went out to the independence ceremonies where Averell Harriman was the head of the U.S. delegation to the swearing in of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe and President Canaan Banana.

It was a ceremonial presidency, so Mugabe was the power. During this transition period whites were guaranteed a certain number of seats and certain powers. Eventually, Mugabe changed the system and became president.

Q: So you had a major part in supporting that delegation to go out to those ceremonies.

SCHMIEL: Oh yes, we had to prepare extensive briefing books, and we also were preparing for a visit which the U.S. Chamber of Commerce put together for a trade delegation about a week or two later. The businessmen were very concerned with Mugabe's socialist leanings and pronouncements, and feared nationalization. We told them they wouldn't nationalize, at least in the short term. At the time we thought Mugabe would be someone who wouldn't make any major changes for a long time. And we were right. He didn't. Ultimately, he did, but for the first 10 or 15 years, Zimbabwe did well.

Q: So you would have been very deeply involved in creating and supporting that first embassy. So who went out?

SCHMIEL: Davidow was in place. He became de facto chargé. He set everything up.

There were a couple of Rhodesians we had been paying all these years to keep the embassy grounds and building up. They stayed on their duty all those years.

The first Ambassador was Bob Keeley, a foreign service veteran.

Q: How about the rest of the staff? All of a sudden, when you're making up a mission like that, everybody is assigned and whatnot, so the personnel guys have to run around and get some bodies.

SCHMIEL: I was leaving the desk in June, so I was not that actively involved in setting it up, as I remember. They only had two or three people in the beginning. They sent several people temporarily from Pretoria.

Q: In May 1980?

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: So while you're setting up this diplomatic breakthrough with regard to Zimbabwe, you have to take care of yourself and your next assignment. What were the mechanics of getting your next assignment?

SCHMIEL: That was the time when both kids were in school and my wife, who had been staying home with them said, "You know, I've really got to get my career going."

She had been a high school English teacher, and now she decided she wanted to try Special ed (Special Education). She was a very nurturing person, which you have to be for that very difficult field. So she was going to be going to George Mason University at night taking classes for a couple of years to get her Master's Degree and certification for Special Ed.

So I needed a job with regular hours, one wherein I could stay home with the kids in the evenings. I couldn't be doing the 12 hours per day Rhodesia desk-type tour any more.

I noticed that the position of Coordinator for the A-100 Program was available. I always loved teaching, so I applied for that. Everybody said, "That's not career enhancing." I knew that, but I decided to take it because it fit well into our family plans and because, having found that course of little utility when I took it, I hoped to have the opportunity to reform the course from the ground up. My new boss, Dick Kilpatrick, said he would give me that opportunity.

Q: When did you start?

SCHMIEL: In July 1980.

Our first class was very large, some 90 people, so it was difficult to do much reforming. It was the150th, the last class brought in under the old Foreign Service Act.

Q: Let me back up. You were talking about a new Foreign Service Act and the old Foreign Service Act.

SCHMIEL: The act of 1980.

Q: Yes, could you describe those differences and how that would have impacted on the A-100 course.

SCHMIEL: It didn't have any that we knew of. I don't think the act really referred to training in any way at all.

Q: Now,A-100 is in the Foreign Service Institute's School for Professional Studies under Sprout?

SCHMIEL: John Sprott was the Dean. He later became Ambassador to Swaziland.

The second year of my tenure, Jim Morton replaced Dick Kilpatrick as the Office Director and Brian Atwood became the Dean of Professional Studies (he later became AID (Agency for International Development) Director. So I got to know Brian quite well.

Dick Kilpatrick was very open to letting me improve the course, as was Jim Morton who came on a year later.

When I began, A-100 was a seven-week program, focused on the ideas of diplomacy, but there was nothing about what you actually did, how you practiced the tools of the trade. Though we had a lecture called Tools of the Trade, it too was academic only, describing the Foreign Affairs Manuals, the rules, etc..

So I instituted several reforms. I cut out most of the visits to other agencies, instead inviting them all to come to talk to us for an hour, as opposed to us going there for four hours. They were generally in agreement.

Then one day I was looking around the shelves in the office and discovered The Anthuria Exercise. I took it over to Dick Kilpatrick and asked him about it, since it appeared to be an embassy simulation course.

He said that FSI had instituted a mid-level course for officers who had been overseas for two tours and were coming back for their first Washington tours. It was a six-month course, as kind of a transition phase of their foreign service career. Paul Kattenburg, a former FSO, had been contracted to create this three day embassy simulation as part of the six months.

I thought that it made little sense to use this for personnel who had already spent four years abroad, but that it was in fact perfect for an A-100 course, for incoming officers with no experience.

I said to Dick Kilpatrick, "Why don't we make this a core element of A-100 training?"

He said, "That's a good idea. How are you going to do it?"

The key was funding. Two things had to be changed, and both centered on funding for what could be an expensive venture. One, we were paying a contractor $10,000 per year to come in and talk about foreign service writing, how to write, to formulate, to put together cables and other documents.

Also, in the A-100 course we had an off-site training exercise which lasted three days and which focused on management, getting to know the Foreign Service, decision making, dissent, etc.

So I proposed that we save money by having me replace the contractor. I would teach the foreign service writing element of the A-100 course by integrating events in the U.S. embassy in the nation of Anthuria, leading up to the scenario for a separate three-day off-site exercise. In the scenario, the new officers would be able to function in a simulated embassy, i.e. making decisions, reacting to events, writing cables, etc. This would be the capstone of the course.

Thanks to Dick Kilpatrick and John Sprott, and the fact that I had saved the $10K, the FSI leadership agreed to fund a second off-site for the embassy simulation.

With the fifth class, we did it in-house, just to see how it went.

Q: What was the date on that?

SCHMIEL: It would have been April/May 1981.

Q: Prior to that, the previous classes were kind of under the old system.

SCHMIEL: Yes and No. I had implemented some of the changes beginning with about the third class, and by the time of the fifth the savings and changes were already showing up.

In any case, in our first run-through of the Anthuria exercise, I made a former secretary who had just become an officer the DCM, the person who would be in charge of the embassy in the absence of the ambassador, who was away. In the scenario, the Vice President has decided to make a spot visit to Anthuria to see how things are going. The ambassador can't get back, so the DCM takes charge of this whole enterprise, preparing for the Vice President's visit. All sorts of other things are going on in the country, as they always are, at the same time.

After we completed the first exercise, the new officers, including the experienced secretary, said it was very useful. They said, "We really saw the interaction and now understand how an embassy functions, at least in simulation."

So beginning with the sixth class, there was a second off-site, the embassy Anthuria exercise.

Before we would begin the exercise I would ask each student what role in the embassy he/she wanted to play. Sometimes, there were 15 roles. If we had 40 people, we had to set up two embassies in parallel. The youngest person always got to be Vic Junioroff, the junior officer, the gofer. That was the little inside joke.

It was a great success, if I say so myself. It is still part of the A-100 course, though because they have moved to the new FSI (Foreign Service Institute), they do it in-house. I think they just do a day and a half; it's a much shorter exercise, which saves money obviously.

Among the people in the seventh class were Bill Burns, the current Deputy Secretary of State, and his wife, Lisa Carty. I always tell people that I don't remember Bill saying anything in class for several weeks. Obviously, he was listening. His career included being an Assistant Secretary, Under and Deputy Secretary, and Ambassador to Russia. He's done well.

One of the other things we did after about two or three of these was to ask foreign service secretaries to participate. I asked Ms. Jessie Coulson, who was in charge of what was then known as secretarial training, if she could find volunteers to participate. She did, and that too added a significant element of realism to the exercise.

By the time I left this job, each and every new officer could say that they had had a simulated experience of a real embassy and it was a very important part of their training. They had not only seen what an embassy does in times of crisis, but they had been one of those who decided what to do and had done it – in a simulation, of course.

I should note that one of the problems with the exercise was that some of these people were such "go-getters" that they were staying up until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning at the off-site, working. They knew the Vice President was coming and they were intent on being prepared. They got it done. They put together briefing books and did a briefing for the Vice President with his briefing book. They got it to him half an hour before the briefing. There was real pressure. It was great to see them do it, and to see them come through, but I was worried about the health of some of them.

One of the ways we reduced the tension was to have a bit of fun with the Anthurians, in this mythical country. For example we had the fellows at the audiovisual center put together an escutcheon, a shield of the Great State of Anthuria. An essential element of this was two outstretched hands. The national motto was, "Dona nobis omnia (Give us everything.)"

Q: The A-100 class actually covers a number of other orientation aspects. Did you still have the consular responsibility?

SCHMIEL: No, ConGen Rosslyn had been invented.

Q: Okay, quickly describe that. Again, that's simulation gaming.

SCHMIEL: Other people were planning that and I was very glad to see it. When I was in A-100, we had learned how to use the manuals, but not the practical side, i.e. the actual mechanics of the visa process. Now, new officers were learning how to use the manuals, but they also had visa machines and saw how they actually worked, how to set them up. They also had the opportunity to practice visiting, in simulation, an American who was in prison, who wasn't very happy with his situation. They would interview him and decide how to help him.

They also learned how to make passports in the Passport Office.

I was very pleased that after the much more practical A-100 that I had implemented that the A-100 students were going through much more practical consular training. ConGen Rosslyn was a group decision, but the reform of A-100 was essentially my idea.

Q: What else did the A-100 course cover?

SCHMIEL: Personnel, the Family Liaison Office (FLO) although I don't know what it was called at the time.

Q: CLO (Community Liaison Office) or FLO.

SCHMIEL: They also had courses for families. Back in 1973 when we joined, my wife went to courses on flower arranging and setting tables. That was the presumption of the diplomatic family, that the spouse was the hostess, and was still being rated at the time.

We were also introducing students to other agencies, getting to know senior officials, getting to know the bureaucracy, the clearance process.

Q: That seven weeks for the course wasn't shortened?

SCHMIEL: No, it was reallocated.

Since that time, the course was made nine weeks long, and then six. A few years ago, they had a lot of psychologists come in and talk about the psychology of diplomacy, personality structuring, and God knows what. It sounded like phrenology to me.

I think that approach was related to the changes in the foreign service exam, which occurred about ten years ago. Your experiences became part of the test, because the Department had determined (they thought) the personality of the quintessentially-successful foreign service officer. This was the mold. The foreign service exam was designed, and still is designed, as I understand it, to find people to fit the mold. A very bad idea in my view, since I don't fit the mold, and you very much need a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds.

Q: Did you ever have the Myers-Briggs personality test?

SCHMIEL: Yes, and the MLAT, the Modern Language Aptitude Test.

Q: Right, to organize what they were going to do with you. If you didn't get high enough on the MLAT, you weren't going to get hard language.

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: I've lost track of the timeline. You have all this stuff about the women suing on the entrance exam and all that. Is that in your period?

SCHMIEL: No, that was in 1972. Those reforms were announced in 1972. Women no longer had to resign if they got married, and spouses were no longer rated. It was fairly fresh at the time when we joined.

As for teaching the A-100 course, I enjoyed the assignment very much. My wife got her degree; I was able to make all kinds of change in the program; and. I enjoyed the teaching, which has always been my first calling.

Q: That tour ends in 1982. Then you are assigned to the embassy in Djibouti, back overseas again. How did you wangle that assignment?

SCHMIEL: I pulled as many strings as I could, but I discovered there was nobody on the other end!

I thought it would be good to get a DCM position in a small post in Africa, but I was not yet a FS-2. Also, having Swedish language ability was useful in Norway, Finland and Denmark, but I wasn't going to be DCM there.

I didn't mention this before, but while I was teaching A-100, I was getting up early and getting to FSI at 7:30 for the early morning French course. It ran from 7:40 to 8:40 every morning; and I could walk across the street to the A-100 office, so it was extremely convenient. That was another reason why teaching A-100 would be useful for the longer term – it allowed me time to study another language.

I took early morning French for two years and got my French up to the 3-3 level by the end of my time at FSI, which I knew would be a necessity for getting a DCM position.

I began looking around and talking to the personnel people in AF about my next assignment.

They said, "Well, you're not going to get a DCM job because you're not a FS-2 yet. But there is a new job opening up in Djibouti. Right now, there's an ambassador, an admin officer, a communicator, and a secretary. But because of the growing involvement of the U.S. military in the region and in Djibouti, DoD (Department of Defense) has agreed to fund half of the cost of a new position, a PolMil (political-military) officer, which will be de facto DCM".

Djibouti had only become independent in 1973, and it was heavily dependent on the French, the former colonial power. The French had a naval base there, so the French and U.S. navies were liaising in Djibouti very often. There were also U.S. P-3s flying from Diego Garcia, watching the Soviet Navy, which was in Ethiopia and Yemen at the time.. And the French had come to us and said, "Djibouti wants to have an engineering company in their military. We can't afford it. Can you help them create an engineering company?"

All these things were coming together and underlined the need for another officer to focus on political-military issues. It looked like a good opportunity.

I came home and told the kids.

They were not happy, because they had just finally got settled back into school. Then, we then looked it up in the encyclopedia., which said, among other things, "Djibouti, also known as the Valley of Hell. One hundred acres under cultivation. Moonscape. Incredible heat." There was no American School, but I thought it had the sound of adventure.

I said, "Well kids, you can learn French now." They were not pleased at the time, but in the long run they did enjoy their stay in Djibouti and became fluent in French.

About a week after we arrived, Ambassador Jerrold North told me he was going to curtail his assignment and was going to leave in three weeks, so I would be the charge' for some time. This was a total surprise and an incredible challenge for someone with only nine years of experience in the Foreign Service. I was now going to have the opportunity to run an embassy.

Eleven months later, the new ambassador arrived, so I had nearly a year as chargé. Not only did I get management experience, but I also got a large pay increase, what is called "chargé pay". On the other hand, DoD was not happy because it was funding half a PolMil officer, and now my salary had increased about 25%.

As it turned out, the military element of the position had grown considerably, even as I had additional responsibilities as charge'. We had 3-4 U.S. Navy ships coming to the harbor every month on their way to and from the Middle East (Bahrain). We had P-3 planes flying in from Diego Garcia. Further, after some training at EUCOM, I was authorized to create and implement the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program for the Djiboutian military's new engineering company.

Q: Take us back to your arrival. If this was such a small embassy in a desolate place, what were the embassy facilities like?

SCHMIEL: There was a small, walled compound on the oceanfront which had been set up by a French company years before. Uncle Sam was wise enough to buy the compound, which was a series of houses on about three acres of land. One of them became the embassy; one was the ambassador's residence, another the admin residence, and the others contained offices for other agencies.

As for our family's housing, we were given a very large dwelling about 100 yards from the embassy. Actually, it was a duplex and they had taken down the wall in between, so it was about 3,000 square feet, a huge house with marble floors. I remember on the first floor, we would take up the rugs and the kids were able to roller-skate.

We had an air conditioner in every room because the average temperature was about 90 year round.

As for shopping, we had to use the French supermarket, where everything was quite expensive because it had to be imported. We were compensated for this via our financial allowances.

We also had opportunities to shop on the visiting United States Navy ships. In a typical month, we would have three frigates or destroyers passing through to or from Bahrain. Or we would also have the P-3s coming in from Diego Garcia, once a week usually, and on occasion we would ask them to bring us consumer goods.

The navy would be in port to gas up and to liaise with the French mainly. The U.S. ships would invite us on board to go to the ship's store to buy supplies.

I remember once that a ship on its way home told us that they had a great deal of excess food. We passed the list around and the staff ordered everything from a 40-pound box of Maine lobster to 40-pound boxes of lamb roasts, hot dogs, and cereal.

We had also been permitted to send out from the U.S. some 4,000 pounds of consumables. When that shipment arrived, we put everything in a special storage room in the house with an air conditioner where we created a little supermarket, with 15-25 boxes of Cheerios, 60 pounds of peanut butter, 40 pounds of jelly, etc.

Djibouti was a very peaceful Muslim country, but with the French influence it was very calm. As I wrote in one of my first messages, Djibouti was a political eye of the hurricane because it was surrounded by tumultuous situations in its neighbors Somalia, Ethiopia and (North and South) Yemen.

Our children attended the French Catholic School, La Nativité. They were lost at first, but eventually they adapted very well to the curriculum and the language. The AID Director's son was there in their first year, so that helped also. He was the same age as David and he helped our children to adapt. There were two other American kids at the school also. Their father was Somali and their mother was American and both worked at the embassy. As we hoped, our children adapted well, and at the end of their second year, they were both in the top five of their class.

Meanwhile, our children also attended schooling in the American style. My wife Bonnie was the American School, using the sunroom in our large house as a classroom and utilizing the Calvert correspondence system. So our children did two years of Calvert, as well as the French School. They got to go to school twice, with Mom as their teacher.

Q: The question was, what was living like?

SCHMIEL: It was hot as hell, but the air conditioning worked. Politically, it was calm, and we always felt secure.

Q: You probably had your own generator. Or were you on city electricity?

SCHMIEL: City electricity. We were near the hospital, so we always got first priority.

Q: Talking about one of your cables where Djibouti was the eye of the storm: one of the other storms in the area was the Iran-Iraq War. That's where Bahrain gets involved, because we've got a naval contingent in the Gulf.

SCHMIEL: COMIDEASTFOR (Commander, Middle East Force).

Q: How about U.S.-Djibouti relations and your contacts with the local government. What kind of people were you dealing with?

SCHMIEL: As in so many former French colonies, the Djiboutian leadership was well trained by the French. When the ships came in, we had to get diplomatic clearance. We got it every time, uniformly, with no problems whatsoever. Of course, we would have receptions on board or at the house. All the prominent Djiboutians came. This was a Muslim country, but the French influence was very strong, so there were no restrictions on alcohol consumption or sales. Also, Djibouti made a great deal of money when the ships came in, e.g. from port duties and the money the sailors spent in town

We had a few aid projects, with the most important in fisheries, wherein we helped create an entirely-new fishing industry, including training Djiboutians how to fish.

Subsequently, we have built a whole new port for them, and Djibouti has become our number one Pol-Mil partner in Africa. We have some 3000 military there now, mostly focused on anti-piracy and counter-terrorism in the region.

During my tenure I helped get Djibouti into the Olympic movement for the Atlanta games. They had been independent for only a very short period of time, so they didn't have an Olympic Committee, which was a requirement. They had three athletes who were long-distance runners, and who were capable of winning medals, but Djibouti had to get into the Olympic movement.

The French were still the proconsuls at that time. We didn't want the French to hear about things second-hand, because they were suspicious of us and our intentions to gain influence. On the other hand, it was their idea that the U.S. help Djibouti create a military engineering company, to which we agreed.

I remember one time when I was talking to the Djiboutian military commander, who, after thanking me for creating the engineering company, suggested that the U.S. should also help by becoming a weapons supplier. I knew that would not happen at that time, but I also was concerned that the French would hear about it and presume the worst.

So soon afterward I got an appointment to see the French Ambassador and told him about the incident, assuring him that we had no intention of becoming an arms supplier to Djibouti. He thanked me for the information, and the matter died there for the time.

Q: This project of the engineering company. What steps did that go through?

SCHMIEL: English training first. They went to…

Q: They designated a certain number of people…

SCHMIEL: NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers), and there was a major who was going to be the commander. He had a university degree. His English was fair. He went to Fort Leonard Wood's U.S. engineering command for his courses.

First the men took several months of English, followed by engineering courses. It was designed to take 2-3 years to get everybody trained up, a group of about 20-25.

Q: Okay, you were getting it started by getting DoD's training up with your liaison with the Djibouti government to see that they identified people, that everybody got their visas, and got off to the States. So no training was in Djibouti?

SCHMIEL: No, there was no one to do it. We didn't have an attaché, or anything else. We didn't have Marines.

Q: Ah, this was an embassy without Marines.

SCHMIEL: Right, we only had local guards.

Q: So what did you do on the Marine Corps' birthday?

SCHMIEL: Our admin officer had been in the Marines, so he hosted it, and one of the communicators from another agency had been in the Marines also.

Q: Excellent. If you were chargé for about 11 months, you probably would have had a July 4th party. Who was there in country to invite to the American national day?

SCHMIEL: Well first, I'll tell you that one of my other innovations was that I decided to ask the Department for permission to have the 4th of July party on George Washington's birthday. I said that in February it was only 80 degrees, on Washington's Birthday, and that it would be much more pleasant for all concerned. We got permission.

My reasoning was that if you thought it was hot in June, it was worse in July. The French did not change their national day, July 14th, Bastille Day.

That first year, there was a U.S. Navy frigate in port on Washington 's Birthday, so the officers came to the party in their dress white uniforms with the high collar. They really looked great. If we had had the party in July, I would not have recommended that they wear dress uniforms.

As for other invitees, we had government officials of course. There were 12 or 13 other embassies, half of which we couldn't invite: Libya, the PLO (People's Liberation Organization), Sudan, Iraq, and a couple of others. We didn't even talk to some of the embassies there. There were local business people, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and enough odds and ends of people that it worked out to be a reasonable group of about 150.

Q: The ethnic group that's in Djibouti is the same as is in southern Ethiopia.

SCHMIEL: No.

Q: Northern Ethiopia then.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: It was the same ethnic group across the border. Was that of any concern at the time?

SCHMIEL: Yes. It always will be. Djibouti had been known as the Territory of Afars and the Issas originally. The Afars are an Ethiopian group primarily from the area of Eritrea. The Issas are the majority, and they are Somali ethnics. The tradition for both of them in ancient history was that one became a man and could marry when he killed one of the other group -- which did not breed good relations between the two of them. As in so many cases in Africa, the Congress of Berlin didn't worry about who was being pushed together and who was not. The French carved out this little enclave because it's opposite Yemen. The British had Yemen, so the French had an equal and opposite enclave at the mouth of the Red Sea.

When Djibouti was on its way to independence, the French worked out an ethnic compromise, as they had done in other colonies: the Issas get the presidency, the Afars

get the prime ministership, though that is a weak office in their system. They also divided up the cabinet and senior bureaucratic positions by ethnic group.

Q: This is our second session with Gene Schmiel. It is Tuesday, January 19th, 2010. We had almost finished discussing his tour in Djibouti.

What I wanted to ask you at this time was what did they perceive to be their main problems?

SCHMIEL: Djibouti was one of the African countries that came to independence very late. The 1950s and 1960s were the era of independence for African countries. Djibouti didn't become independent until 1973, partly because it was so small. At the time, there were about 220,000 people. They had no real viable economy. Nothing could be cultivated there. There was no industry. There was a very good harbor, however. There was also a railroad built by the French to Addis Ababa, so Djibouti did much of the transport for Ethiopia's trade. Asmara was the other port city up in northern Ethiopia, which today is part of Eritrea.

Djibouti was a country that will probably always be poverty-stricken, but it is located in a very difficult region and it has played a weak hand well in working with the U.S. and French to base military there and spend a great deal of money on improvements to the harbors and ports.

The French had air force and navy there. They still do. The French troops used to tell us that they loved Djibouti because they got triple pay, 200 percent allowances. As a result, after three years, they could go home and buy a house for the first time. The money they spent there was a significant part of the Djiboutian economy.

Everything was expensive because it had to be flown in. There were two to three Air France cargo flights a month.

Economic viability is something I never see happening in Djibouti.

Q: Who ended up running the government in Djibouti?

SCHMIEL: At independence, they set up a parliament which, per the ethnic agreement, chose the new president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, an Issa. He became the father of the country. It was a one-party state. The Afars were given half of the cabinet positions, including the prime minister position and certain other important ones. .

Today they have a multi-party parliament, but one is an Issa party primarily, the other primarily an Afar party.

Q: In the summer of 1985, for your own personal career, you move on to your next job. This was to gain a congressional fellowship to work up on the hill. 1985 was the same year as the start of the second Reagan Administration. What is this congressional fellowship and how did you get it?

SCHMIEL: It was always something I was interested in. When the bid list came out early in 1984, it was one of the options I thought actively about. At that time, they were taking seven or eight people through the American Political Science Association (APSA) and seven or eight through the Pearson Program.

In the APSA program one did four months in the Senate and four months in the House, or one could choose to spend the entire time in one of the two bodies.

The APSA program began with two months of classes at SAIS, and I chose it both because I wanted experience in both houses, plus since we were coming back from overseas, having two months of classes first made the transition that much easier. We had to find and buy a house, settle in, get the kids in school, etc.

Q: And the basic assumption behind these programs was to get executive branch officers some legislative branch experience?

SCHMIEL: Right, exactly that, cross-fertilization, so that each branch of government would understand the other a bit better. It would be a chance to see how the other side worked and potentially cement long-term relations.

I think one of the purposes was to get people to work in the Congressional Relations Office at State coming out of this program, so that those in that office would have had the experience. But that turned out not to be true, which I found surprising.

Q: Actually, there is a whole bureau in the State Department called the Bureau of Congressional Relations.

SCHMIEL: Right. And so people there, as far as I know, have little or no congressional experience coming into the jobs.

Q: The specific office that you worked in on the hill, was that something you were able to choose, or the program handed you? How did that work?

SCHMIEL: In the APSA program there were about 40 people from State, CIA, and the private sector, e.g. journalists, health sector professionals, etc. We were together for the two months of classes, and we also met periodically as a group during the year. We also all got a trip to Ottawa in an exchange program with Canadian fellows who made a similar trip to Washington.

We were given a list of possible assignments in some 40 or 50 offices which had expressed interest in interviewing people from this program. These were offices that probably had had someone numerous times or was interested in having free expertise. Congressional offices get a certain amount of money, but if they could get a free expert, they would be very happy.

Not surprisingly, two of the people on the list were Congressmen Dick Cheney from Wyoming, and Lee Hamilton from Indiana. Cheney came to Washington as a congressional fellow under the American Political Science Association when he was a graduate student. That was his introduction to Washington. He and Hamilton were the two co-chairmen of the program who signed the letter welcoming the new congressional fellows. They were very much the patrons of the program.

I was interested in working in an office which was not necessarily foreign policy oriented so I could broaden my experience.

I actually interviewed with both Hamilton and Cheney. Hamilton wanted someone to do foreign policy, but just on a research basis. Hamilton was a very powerful person then, senior in the Foreign Affairs Committee, but the position would not enable me to work with him on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the job with Cheney would be hands-on and not focused on foreign policy. Cheney's focus then was on Interior Department matters. He was also a member of the Republican leadership, so this was a chance to do something other than foreign policy, and also get to know someone who is in the leadership, someone who had a bright future. (He is only two years older than I).

Also, I would note that one of the other positive elements of the congressional fellow program was that you got to go to the district for a week during a break. The State Department would fund your travel and you could see how the Senator or the Congressman worked in their district.

Those are among the reasons why in the end I chose Cheney's office. It was a small office with good people. I got a few domestic issues to deal with, and a few foreign policy issues to deal with, and I got a very useful week in Wyoming, with him and his staff out there.

In Wyoming I was able to visit Maxwell Air Force Base, the home of the Minuteman missiles. We went down into the earth via elevators and spoke with the two Air Force airmen whose job was to launch the missiles upon command. About every ten minutes, they would get a test message; just to make sure things were working. And yes, they were far enough apart that they couldn't push the button at the same time.

I also was engaged in other district activities, e.g. seeing the congressman do interviews, talking to local politicians and business people and such.

It was more interesting with Cheney, because he was the only congressman from Wyoming.

Q: Given its small population.

SCHMIEL: Also, he was well-known nationally. He had gone from a congressional fellow to, six or seven years later, Chief of Staff for President Ford. To say the least, this was a rather rapid rise. He was re-elected with 70 or 80 percent of the vote every time.

Q: How much of that partisan organization did you see while you were in that office?

SCHMIEL: We weren't allowed to get involved in partisan politics, nor were any of the other staff people. The staff people are civil service, therefore they cannot be political.

I did get involved in one semi-political issue. President Reagan had asked Cheney to take the lead on the line item veto in the House. So he and I, and Mitch McConnell and his staffer, had a small meeting to get the ball rolling. McConnell was going to take the lead in the Senate, Cheney in the House.

We didn't get too many Democrats to sign on, but we kept trying to move that legislation along.

Q: So actually in any congressman's office there is sort of a core…

SCHMIEL: Professional staff.

Q: … of professional staff. And then there is his political staff.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: How was he personally to work for?

SCHMIEL: He was great. He was a laid-back westerner. He wore his cowboy boots. He said, "Call me Dick. You are Gene. First-name basis. This is what we do out in the west."

So it was a first-name basis from the very beginning. Again, he was a patron of the Congressional Fellows Program, so he put himself out to make me comfortable. We went to lunch twice, just the two of us.

On one of those occasions I built up my nerve to ask him, "What about your heart?" He had already had a couple of heart attacks at the time. There was a hereditary problem. I said, "What's your outlook?"

He said, "I have to be fatalistic. I could drop dead in five minutes, but my dad is still around. I've stopped smoking and started exercising. I'm doing a variety of other things, but I have to be fatalistic about it. I really don't know where I'm going, but I'm charging ahead. I can't let it stand in the way."

Q: My impression is that these are quite modest accommodations in the House.

SCHMIEL: Yes. Well, the congressman's office is quite nice, but the staff is squeezed into two other rooms. Twelve or fourteen other people are in the other two rooms, so you are very much thrown together constantly.

Q: You were there on this exchange program. I would also assume that during the summer there might be college kids on an intern basis, or something like that.

SCHMIEL: They had an intern occasionally, but not while I was there. Interesting, because teaching in an intern program became my career after my retirement, but I really didn't pay much attention to the issue at the time.

I started in December and stayed until April. Senator Murkowski, who I worked for later, had lots of interns, but that was different -- Senate offices are so much larger.

Q: Okay, well that's a good comparison to make.

Murkowski was your program choice on the Senate side.

SCHMIEL: I could have stayed with Cheney if I had wanted to. But one of the more enticing positions open, in my view, was with Senator Frank Murkowski of Alaska. He was a junior senator, but on the Foreign Relations Committee, so this would be an opportunity to engage in foreign affairs from the congressional angle. So I looked into that and was hired to be one of the two foreign policy advisers on his staff.

Q: And you interviewed for that also?

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: With the senator himself or a senior aide?

SCHMIEL: With senior staff, a fellow named John Moseman. He was Legislative Director at the time. He chose me and then introduced me to the senator.

It was interesting for me to be one of the liaisons to the Foreign Relations Committee. There was a larger office, nicer facilities, and I got a parking pass.

Q: At that time, was the Washington, DC Metro system in place?

SCHMIEL: It was coming, but I wouldn't say it was so great.

Q: The Senate office has a little bit larger staff?

SCHMIEL: Right, even though Alaska was as small as Wyoming. It too only had one representative and two senators. Nevertheless, even a senator from Alaska had an office probably four times as large as a typical House office, two floors in the Hart Building.

Q: How would the senator's staff be organized?

SCHMIEL: Part of it was because of his interests, in Murkowski's case meaning foreign policy and trade. He was on a total of five committees, including Indian Affairs. Much of his focus was on Energy because of Alaska's oil and gas industries, and he would ultimately chair that committee.

Q: But his committee assignments would reflect the kind of talent he organized around himself.

SCHMIEL: Right. I think there were 25 people on the permanent staff, and there were two or three who were political people. The latter were walled off and they did nothing but politics and fund raising. They were sociable with everybody else, but they did not integrate in work terms with the other staff, because of the law that professional staff cannot do political activity; the political people cannot do professional work. I am

guessing that those peoples' salaries were paid by the campaign. I never really asked, but I presumed they were not paid for by congressional appropriations.

Q: Are we off Cheney?

SCHMIEL: I don't know. It was an interesting experience for five months. We went out to the district. I got to know him very well. He was very open.

I learned a bit about House procedures. I can tell you one vignette, looking ahead at how serendipity works. More than once, a young congressman named Newt Gingrich would come by with a couple of others to chat with Cheney. I think Gingrich and his cohort of conservatives looked at Dick Cheney as their intellectual leader. He was the Republican Whip at the time.

They would come in for ideas and talk to him about where to go on domestic policy. As history turned out, after the change in the House, after 46 years or something like that, of Democratic control, were it not for John Tower not being confirmed as Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney would have been Speaker of the House, instead of Newt Gingrich. Cheney was next in line, and would have stayed in the House, had not President George H.W. Bush asked him to be Secretary of Defense.

Q: Okay, that's the break.

SCHMIEL: That's the breaks.

Dick Cheney and his wife Lynne wrote a book called, Kings of the Hill: How Nine Powerful Men Changed The Course Of American History. It was a history of the role of the Speakers of the House. At the time, his eye was on being Speaker someday.

Cheney was obviously very ambitious. When you are Chief of Staff for the President at the age of 35 or 36, you are considered a very fair-haired boy who was going far. And he did.

So I finished up there. They didn't want me to go, but I said I wanted to experience the Senate, especially since it would include being liaison to the Foreign Relations Committee. So I moved over to Senator Murkowski in April.

I also had a chance as part of the program to go to Alaska. During that trip I went to the beginning of the arctic oil pipeline in the city of Dead Horse at Point Barrow, also known as Point Barren, up in northern Alaska.

The ARCO people met me and gave me the full tour of their facilities, the oil, the pipeline beginnings, and such.

Q: Again, State paid your transportation.

SCHMIEL: Yes.

As for my responsibilities, Senator Murkowski worked on a variety of foreign policy issues, and so my responsibilities included writing constituent letters on those issues. Alaska was so small, he insisted that each letter be answered individually. So I got a chance to write letters on his view of issues based on his voting record and other things.

I also went to and prepared him for committee hearings. Senator Richard Lugar was Chairman at the time. Senator Jesse Helms was number two on the Republican side, because he had made a deal that he would take the chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee if he got re-elected, which he did.

There were ten people on the Republican side. Almost every time when we would take a vote about things to do, it was nine to one. Senator Helms' people didn't agree with his fellow Republicans on much of anything. At one point, in fact, three of the ten liaisons to the committee on the Republican side were State Department congressional fellows.

All in all, I had a very good experience, very broadening, in the Senate. I even got to put together a hearing. Senator Murkowski, having been a banker, understood loans and debt. He wanted to reform the FMS (Foreign Military Sales) system, from loans into grants.

Q: Could you quickly explain the differentiation between authorization and appropriations?

SCHMIEL: The Congress' s role in foreign policy is the power of the purse fundamentally. If they don't fund an activity, it's not going to happen. Also, they can make policy, or urge policy, or outlaw certain activities in authorization bills. So every year, there is a chance for a State Department authorization bill and a Foreign Aid authorization bill, which can include policy elements.

It has always been very, very difficult to get this done in the Senate. There are always contentious issues.

On the other hand, you have to appropriate the money each year. That was a separate committee. They were getting it done, and they had more and more power, because the authorizers had not passed a bill for many years.

Senator Lugar, during his two years as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was able to get an authorization bill for the State Department and Foreign aid passed. He is very highly respected, a very talented Senator who was able to work with both sides.

Q: Of course, the authorization is a new set of instructions for the appropriators, if you will.

SCHMIEL: Exactly right, what should be funded, what should not be funded, and what are the limits of funding. Sometimes there were ceilings, sometimes floors.

One of the things Senator Murkowski was trying to do was to get an amendment to shift FMS primarily from loans to grants.

Q: And the advantage would be?

SCHMIEL: Essentially to reduce the debt burden for allies. He was really interested in South Korea and Asia, and was on the East Asia Sub-Committee. Asian trade was very big for Alaska: Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.

Q: The American debt burden.

SCHMIEL: No, the debt burden on the South Koreans.

Q: On the South Koreans?

SCHMIEL: That we would give them grants instead of loans. We were charging market rates in some cases. If you remember in the 1980s, loan rates were extremely high: 10 or 15 or 18 percent for mortgages.

I was on the floor with the Senator when he offered the amendment. Senator Lugar responded that he would rather not bring up the amendment (he actually opposed it), but suggested instead that there be a hearing about it. Murkowski asked my opinion; I agreed; so he agreed also and withdrew the amendment.

Then, the next week, we began planning for a full-scale hearing on the issue. I prepared the briefing books, did the consultations, the scheduling with the Foreign Relations Committee staff, the State Department people and others about the nature of the hearing and when it would take place. I wrote the opening statements for the senator. I wrote questions for him. I put the hearing together and got it all ready. About two months later, we had the hearing.

Q: Did this also involve you liaising with Congressional Research Service for background materials?

SCHMIEL: Not really.

Q: So it was all put together in his office.

SCHMIEL: In his office along with the Foreign Relations Committee staff, Senator Lugar's people who were the professional staff, and a couple of others who knew the issue in much more depth than I did. I had no particular expertise in FMS

Q: In addition to organizing the testimony, the argumentation, and the approach, you would also be making a decision as to who might be invited as witnesses.

SCHMIEL: Right, I talked to the State Department people. As I recall, the Under Secretary for Assistance – what is it called these days? Technology, Security Assistance, Science, etcetera. It was at the under secretary level. I think we had a couple of private witnesses, people that the Foreign Relations Committee staff suggested. I relied heavily on them, because I was a transitory figure, but they had the expertise. Senator Murkowski was going to chair the hearing, but I relied heavily on the staff.

I prepared all these materials and got them ready at least a week ahead of time. It was a learning process for me about congressional procedures. I briefed John Moseman, who was now Chief of Staff, about the process and kept asking when we would go over the materials with the Senator. He said it would happen eventually.

The day of the hearing arrived – it was scheduled for 11 A.M. At 9:45 that day, the senator came over and sat next to me and said, "Okay. Tell me about the hearing. Tell me what we are going to do."

I said, "Well Senator, here's your briefing book. You'll see in the briefing book your opening statement where you thank Senator Lugar for agreeing to do this. He'll be sitting there next to you. He'll nod his head. Here's your opening statement. The administration is probably going to say this, and here's your questions."

"Okay, fine."

An hour later, we were sitting in the room. So I thought that was an interesting approach, far different than how we did it at State. I learned later that Senator Murkowski typically put things together at the last minute.

Q: You must have cleared his initial statement with his senior staffer or something.

SCHMIEL: Yes, John Moseman. Just the two of us were doing it. I told Lugar's people to make sure he was there so Senator Murkowski could thank him for doing this.

Q: Had Alaska already begun to produce the oil?

SCHMIEL: Oh yes.

Q: My understanding is that oil…

SCHMIEL: It went to the pipeline.

Q: … consistency that there were no refineries in the United States that could refine it. It was actually sold to Japan. Or have I misremembered?

SCHMIEL: Some of it was, but I think by law, everything that came out of the pipeline had to be sent to the United States. Alaska had other oil which is exported. Alaska wanted to export more and more of the oil. Congress restricted the output of the pipeline to domestic use. I have no idea where it was refined.

With Cheney, I didn't do much vote recommending. There weren't that many votes going on. With Murkowski, because the State Department authorization, the Foreign Aid authorization, and other legislation was coming up, I was doing a great deal of vote recommending. When the bill would come up, my initial role was to sit and listen to the debate. We had little radios on our desks so we could listen or we could go down to the cloakroom on the Senate floor. We could go to the back of the cloakroom to try to get a feel for the schedule for what was coming up next.

Any time there was going to be a vote, my job was to type up a summary, including a description of the issue, the nature of the vote/amendment, a list of who was in favor and who opposed, and a summary of how he voted in the past. I would then recommend how he should vote. The bell would ring for the vote. A couple of minutes later, I would give the Senator the sheet of paper. He would look at it, get on the subway and go to the floor for the vote.

Senators Lugar and Claiborne Pell, the ranking Democrat, were managing these bills, and Murkowski would always consult with Lugar about his vote.

Most of these votes were not difficult for me to do because Murkowski had been consistent in his voting patterns. However, I remember one time when something peculiar happened. There was an amendment on another bill which Senator D'Amato proposed. I looked it up, got the information, and said to Murkowski, "You've always voted No, so vote No."

But when he got to the floor he voted "Aye."

He got back to the office and he called me in and said, "You might wonder why I voted aye on that."

He said, "Well, Senator D'Amato knew it was going to fail. He was doing it for local politics, so he wanted to get as many votes as he could. I did him a favor and voted aye. My constituents in Alaska don't care, so why not?"

Q: That's how votes are traded.

SCHMIEL: A little vignette of Congress. He took the time to explain to me why he had done it. That was fine.

Q: Basically, he was doing it as a courtesy to a colleague.

SCHMIEL. Right.

The Senate is so much of a bigger place with fewer people, outsize personalities. You learn who is respected and who is not, who is playing a big role and who is not.

Q: Do some of those attitudinal issues flow into the staff too? Do the staff people take over?

SCHMIEL: The staff people take on the personality of the Senator frequently. If there is an arrogant senator, the staff tends to be arrogant. If there's a humble senator, the staff tends to be humble. Not necessarily, but you could see it, especially with those who had power and those who had been around a long time.

I didn't see this in Lugar's people. Dick Lugar was someone everyone liked and respected, and his staff people were also seen that way.

The Foreign Relations Committee staff too: Graeme Bannerman was Chief of Staff. He is a good friend of mine to this day. Another staffer was Andy Semmel, who was the defense weapons expert. Andy came over later to the State Department and was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in VCI (Bureau of Verification, Compliance, and Implementation). Now, he's the International Atomic Agency rep in Washington, working out of the UN offices. I got to know him then and have known him ever since. He came

to speak to my classes when I was at the internship program. He's one of those I worked with very closely in preparing this hearing, underlining the fact that Washington is a very small place.

Q: Did you get the impression that there was kind of a career path among the professional staff? If somebody didn't get re-elected, his staff got picked up or didn't get picked up. You might not have been there long enough to see those kinds of transitions.

SCHMIEL: Actually I didn't pay much attention to that, but in general most staffers did not stay around for the long term.

As for myself, I started with Senator Murkowski in April, thinking I would stay until August. Then I was assigned to Mombasa beginning in the summer of 1986, with language training beginning in January that year. I therefore had a gap from August until January. So we petitioned and I was able to extend and stay with Senator Murkowski until December 1985.

Q: So you extended in Murkowski's office.

SCHMIEL: Yes, until December 21st or 23rd, something like that, in 1985. That was fine with me, because I really enjoyed working there.

Q: So you ended your tour with Murkowski when?

SCHMIEL: In December 1985.

Q: So Cheney would be April to…

SCHMIEL: It was the previous December to April.

Q: Ah. And then April to August for Murkowski?

SCHMIEL: April to August was the assignment, but then I got extended to December because I had language training beginning the following January, my Swahili training.

Q: Right.

SCHMIEL: So I stayed there for eight months all together. We were in session all the way through because of the budget difficulties, all the way through December 21st or 22nd, right before Christmas. They finally got the budget resolution appropriation for the fiscal year that began October 1st.

Q: About three months earlier.

SCHMIEL: That's about the norm these days.

(I went back to work for Murkowski again in 1995).

I was going to start Swahili training in early February 1986. So I still had about a five or six-week gap with no assignment after leaving Murkowski's staff in late December.

It happened at that time that there was a problem with whoever had been nominated to be Ambassador to Guinea-Bissau, so several officers had been sent out to be chargé at the embassy. I had the time available, so I was sent out as chargé in Guinea-Bissau in January.

My protestations that I didn't speak Portuguese – it's a Portuguese speaking country –were met with the comment that French is their second language.

So I could use my French, and so I was sent for the second time in my career to be a chargé at a little embassy in Africa. I did that for five weeks in early January through early February.

Q: What did the mission look like?

SCHMIEL: There were four or five State people, six or seven AID people. There were a lot of contractors. Like all too many African countries, there was considerable political ferment, but not much development, considerable agricultural potential, but not much developed.

Eventually we closed our embassy there because the political and security situation became so difficult. (This was several years later).

There was minimal national interest by the United States, other than development by AID. As a result, I was astounded to find when I got there, that the process had begun before my time to create an additional political-economic officer position for the embassy, so the ambassador would have another reporting officer.

Q: So this was a series of people going out TDY.

SCHMIEL: Right, for about a month or so at a time.

Q: Who was in front of you? Do you recall?

SCHMIEL: No, they had already gone. I came. There was a gap. The Admin Officer, an 03, was Chargé.

Q: The Africa Bureau thought well enough of your talents and seeing you lying on the floor, sleeping in the corridors, decided…

SCHMIEL: It gave me something to do before Swahili training.

Q: Swahili training started when?

SCHMIEL: I'm thinking late January or early February 1986. It was to be a 22 week course. We had a Kenyan and a Tanzanian, both native speakers, who were our teachers. .

It was very different from Swedish, obviously. Missionaries had at one point changed it from Arabic script to Roman script, making it that much easier for me to learn. Swahili is a made-up language, which combines a variety of African languages, Arabic, and English. It's a traders' language made up mainly by the Omanis and the others who came to East Africa for trade in ivory.

The winds along the east coast of Africa for six months of the year flow south, and for six months of the year flow north. The Arab traders would sail south, land, kill the men, take back their women and the ivory, and then sail back the other six months of the year. The resultant Swahili people are a mixture of Arabic and African, and most are Muslim. In Swahili, there are many words that have English roots from British colonialist Kenya, Arabic, and the native languages.

It is a well-structured language, and it took me about ten weeks to "crack the code" and understand the structure. Then it was just a question of adding vocabulary. It was a very interesting learning experience, something that didn't match up with anything I had done before, not even Latin.

Q: In what way?

SCHMIEL: For example, it is a language of agglutination. In English, the phrase 'when I will arrive' is four different words. In Swahili, it would be one word, nitakapofika. It would be "glued together" in a certain way, as follows: ni (I), ta (will), ka (no meaning, but you have to say it in this structure – you have to put this piece in there that has no meaning.) Po (when) and fika (arrive). When I will arrive, nitakapofika, one word.

Another complication was that there were six cases of nouns, twelve counting the plurals.

Q: My god.

SCHMIEL: For example, the word 'of' is spelled 12 different ways, dependent on the preceding noun. Today for lunch one had "chakula cha mchana," meaning food of the afternoon. Cha is of, because it is chakula. On the other hand, if you had a lot of it, you would have "vyakula vya mchana." The plural of cha is vya. The word 'of' is now spelled v-y-a, because of the preceding noun.

Steve McIlvaine and I were in the class together with Jerry Lanier, who later became Ambassador to Uganda. Jerry went to Nairobi, Steve to Dar Es Salaam, and I went to Mombasa.

Here is a related vignette about the Foreign Service Institute. The two teachers were African men, Swahili native speakers. Their job was to speak, ours to repeat. The FSI method was that one never discussed grammar, and one never discussed structure. At various times during a break, I would have a little seminar with Jerry and Steve, because I had a bit better understanding of language, and I tried to explain grammatical structures to them. A couple of times, the teacher came in and said, "No, you can't do that. You can't explain grammar." Well, it was the means I used to understand language, so I continued to explain it to my colleagues, even though it was "forbidden."

Q: The materials you were using were FSI materials.

SCHMIEL: Yes, and we had local Learning Swahili books, literature, newspapers and such. They had very good materials and it was very good training.

Q: So at 22 weeks or whenever, what did you test out at?

SCHMIEL: Three-three. I came back with about a three-plus. Mombasa is Swahili country, where using the language is very important. By contrast, in Nairobi they speak a very uncomplicated version of the language which I found very basic. Frequently, when visiting Nairobi I would speak the "elegant" formal Swahili I had learned, and I would get peculiar looks because it was not a version they heard often.

Q: How did the process unfold to get this assignment to Mombasa plus language?

SCHMIEL: I had been in Djibouti. One of my main jobs there had been working with the navy and ship visits, and the P-3s. One of the key parts of the job in Mombasa was managing the visits of Navy carrier groups. There were three or four per year, each with some 10,000 men in port for a week. The job also involved liaison at the port for AID shipments not only to Kenya but also inland to Burundi and Rwanda. In sum, the job required someone with experience in Africa, management, and working with the military. So I was a prime candidate.

Q: So, there was a little more application on your part than checking a couple of boxes on the bid list? Did you interview?

SCHMIEL: Actually, I had been in Mombasa before. A friend of mine, Bob Gribbin, had been the principal officer there. They had a regional conference in Mombasa when I was in Djibouti. I flew down to Mombasa and stayed in the house.

So when the job came up, it was my first choice. It looked like a natural follow-on, because I had so many similar experiences before. I was certainly well known in the Africa Bureau.

Q: This illustrates the point that often people get homes in a bureau. They begin to take multiple assignments, and begin to gain experience that gives them a leg up on the next job. I think that's what I hear you saying, that Mombasa was where a lot of these other previous experiences came together. It made you a very good candidate for that.

When did you arrive in Mombasa?

SCHMIEL: The summer of 1986.

Q: What were the physical conditions in the embassy? What kind of a building was it? How big was it?

SCHMIEL: The house was a relatively-small bungalow with about 1.5 acres of land, which we would use for receptions. The consulate was in an office building and was staffed by three State people: A principal officer, a secretary, and a communicator.

There were also 11 U.S. Navy personnel. Two years before, the navy had decided to create a Communications Liaison Office from, among other places, Diego Garcia, up to the Persian Gulf. They decided that Mombasa would be a great place to do it. The Kenyans agreed.

The consulate was on the 5th floor. On the 6th floor was the large navy communications unit with nine seamen, all communicators, doing a 24/7 communications relay. They were supervised by a lieutenant.

So I supervised two other State people, these 11 people in the navy, and also a navy chief who was responsible for husbanding, etc., when the fleet came in. All of the Navy staff were under the supervision of KUSLO, Kenyan U.S. Liaison Office at the embassy in Nairobi. There was a colonel heading up that office in Nairobi.

Q: And the consulate in Mombasa is the only constituent post in country? There is just the embassy…

SCHMIEL: Right. Mombasa because it has the largest harbor in East Africa, up to Durban.

Q: That would be why Mombasa was chosen for the consulate, since it had this excellent harbor, and geographic condition up the coast related to Diego Garcia, the Persian Gulf, and those activities.

SCHMIEL: And we agreed with the Kenyans that it would be a great place for the navy to come for R&R (Rest and Recreation).

As part of that process, the U.S. and Kenya agreed that the U.S. would finance widening and dredging of the entrance to the harbor, so that carriers could come into the harbor, along with all the other support ships.

The U.S. spent $25 million on harbor widening, but no carrier ever came into the inner harbor. The problem was that if there were a strong gust of wind, the carrier could easily go aground at the harbor's entrance, which required a sharp turn just after entry. No captain wanted to have that on his record since running aground tends to ruin their careers.

So the carriers all stayed a half-mile out, though all the support ships came into the harbor and docked inside.

For Kenya the carrier visits were an economic boon. The carrier group's crews spent $5 to $6 million in Kenya on everything from gas to food to beer to tourism, going to the game parks, etcetera.

Q: At this time, the Iran-Iraq War was going on in the Persian Gulf. Did that affect the navy presence in any way?

SCHMIEL: That was probably one of the reasons why the navy had the relay unit there. We had a lot more ship visits than I think we would have otherwise. The carrier group was up in the Gulf of Oman when they weren't with us. They were watching, but they certainly weren't involved.

Q: I'm sorry. Let me back up a bit. You were saying that you had certain floor in this building? Did you lease the whole building?

SCHMIEL: No, we were just on the 5th and 6th floor for our offices. We had minimal security, only a local security guard. We walled ourselves in as best we could. We thought of Mombasa as a very quiet and safe place, much quieter and safer than Nairobi. And it was.

Q: During your time there, did you get much attention from the embassy? Did the ambassador visit? Were there regular…

SCHMIEL: There was a very large regional AID staff in Nairobi in the embassy. They would come down to Mombasa when aid ships arrived, and they would oversee the offloading and onward shipping.

The ambassador would come down for the ship visits, which were seen as a critically-important part of our bilateral relations with Kenya.

Q: Did you have the same sort of communications set up that you had in Durban?

SCHMIEL: Yes, we were on our own. We sent our own messages. We had a full-time communicator. It was a much more modern system.

Q: OCR (Optical Character Reader).

SCHMIEL: Yes, OCR. That made a big difference. And if we needed back up, I had a huge navy communications unit. That made a big difference. I only used their facilities a couple of times, but it was good to know they were there for emergencies.

Q: As Consul-General, you must have had a considerable amount of liaison with local government authorities.

SCHMIEL: Yes, Coast Province in Kenya, like Natal Province in South Africa, was the least politically important. The largest ethnic groups in Kenya are the Kikuyu, the Luo, and the Luhya. There are few of those in Coast Province, whose largest groups include the Swahili and some smaller tribes.

It is very different from the rest of Kenya, i.e. it is more like Zanzibar than any other region, with the mixed-race Swahili people and a large Muslim population.

One of the very first reports that I wrote was a 20-page cable about Coast Province and why it didn't have any influence on national politics. I wrote that the local joke was that people would go from Coast Province to Nairobi, and when they came back, their friends would ask them, "How are things up in Kenya?"

Q: Because of the ship visits and whatnot, you would have had to have a productive relationship with the local governor, the local police. What were those Kenyan officials like?

SCHMIEL: They were appointed by the central government and so were creatures of Nairobi and not the region. The governmental system was very centralized. I got to know the governor, the mayor, and the police chief. This was very important when you needed them for emergencies and such. Whenever a ship would come in, if there were an admiral with the group or a captain, we would make courtesy calls on the government officials on the first day. We would also arrange that at some of their pet projects, e.g. orphanages, sailors would volunteer to do repairs at buildings, as charitable work. Many sailors volunteered for this work, which had a considerable win-win result.

I should note that one key subject when I first met with the provincial governor was the two rape cases in 1980 and in 1982. U.S. sailors were accused of raping and murdering prostitutes during ship visits. In the first case, the fellow was convicted and then was let go after a month, which was extremely controversial. In the second case, the sailor, who

was clearly innocent, was acquitted. When discussing these cases with me, the governor said, "We've had these two cases in very recent memory. We very much hope we will not have any of these again."

I said, "Governor, I agree with you totally. I will do everything I can."

Fortunately, we did not have any such serious problems during my tenure.

There was another issue that showed the importance of FSI language training. I remember when I called on the police chief for the first time for my courtesy call. I sat down and told him who I was, why I was there, what I was going to do, all in Swahili, for about five minutes.

He nodded his head and he asked me a question, in English. I responded in Swahili. He asked me another question. I responded in Swahili. He stopped and said, "Wow. You really speak Swahili. I thought you had memorized that speech."

All this was in Swahili. After this he clearly had a new, positive impression of me and the U.S.

The same was true whenever I was out in public, shopping or going to museums, I always spoke first in Swahili. Over time my ability in the language improved, and the people I interacted with were pleased.

Q: As you say, that's always well appreciated.

SCHMIEL: Oh yes, absolutely.

Q: It opens doors. You didn't have a consular officer. You were it. So if a sailor did get into trouble, or whatnot, you would be immediately involved.

Let's talk about that for a minute. The fleet comes in.

SCHMIEL: Ten thousand young men. Average age nineteen. At sea for three months.

Q: The navy brings with it some sort of authority force, police force.

SCHMIEL: SP, Shore Patrol.

Q: What was their authority and their liaison with the local police? I mean, they weren't actually running patrols up and down the streets, were they?

SCHMIEL: No, but they would be around, especially in the bars and local hangouts for sailors. We would liaise with the police, who would appreciate having the shore patrol there. They had implicit authority and the sailors knew they were there.

One of the key and ironic factors that kept things a bit calmer when I was there was AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Even then, AIDS was well known. When the fleet was coming in, I would send a standard message to the admiral, the captain, or whoever was in command about all aspects of the visit. There was a very significant section about AIDS. I said that with the proliferation of AIDS in Kenya, the sailors could no longer take the casual approach they had in the past with prostitutes.

I think my message got through, at least to most sailors. As I walked around the city during the visits, I got the impression that some of the older sailors would go around with the younger ones to ward them off from the danger. They were much more careful, much less inclined to take chances. They might take chances with gonorrhea, but they weren't going to take as many chances with AIDS. There were some who did obviously, but I heard very little about that afterwards.

My job was to make sure the sailors and officers had a good time and kept out of trouble, which we did for the most part. There were very few incidents, no real problems. And no murder cases!

Q: One of the political things the fleet might do while it is in port, is escort local dignitaries and give them a tour of the ship, or something like that. Was that a fairly common practice that you might have become involved in?

SCHMIEL: Yes, the original plan when the U.S. financed the widening and dredging of the harbor was to have the carrier come into port. It would have been magnificent, this huge structure dominating the harbor, and having a cocktail party aboard. So instead we would have lunch onboard the carrier, with the VIPs ferried out to the carrier by helicopter. The ambassador would often come to Mombasa for the occasion also. And on occasion my family and I would be heloed out too. That was a great experience for them, with the helmets, the jackets, the safety briefing, and everything else.

I had a video camera and videotaped the whole thing – the helo captain flew around the ship a couple of times to give us a better view, including the landing on the ship.

Then we would have a cocktail party at the residence in the evening. That's when we would invite upwards of 200 people. I think 30 officers from the various ships would come, to co-host with me and the admiral or captain. The residence had about two acres of land, so there was plenty of room.

Q: Who would be on your guest list for a large event like that?

SCHMIEL: Local officials, business people, and American missionaries. Most of the American community was missionaries, and I had many good friends among them.

Q: There were no other diplomatic missions in town.

SCHMIEL: Only the Indians and the Rwandans had consulates, and they of course were invited to these receptions. There were several honorary consuls who were business people, so I would have invited them anyway.

Q: What kind of a town was Mombasa like?

SCHMIEL: It was about half a million people, a port city, reasonably well developed. There were two harbors. Mombasa Island has on one side the new, modern harbor, and on the other the old harbor where the dhows would come in, and still do. Mombasa has been operating for about 150 years as a port of call.

Q: Mombasa is close to the border with Somalia, isn't it?

SCHMIEL: Further up north, about 150 miles, Kenya borders on Somalia.

Q: It's that further north? I thought it was closer than that.

SCHMIEL: No. I remember later, was it in 1992 or 1993 when the conflict broke out, there was starvation in Somalia. We wanted to get supplies in there. I remember being in the State Department and heard some people saying, "Well, we'll get the consulate in Mombasa to coordinate and fly everything out of Mombasa Airport."

Well, we couldn't do so because the consulate had been closed! In the wisdom of the State Department, instead of keeping one person in Mombasa and 200 in Nairobi, they decided that we didn't need anybody in Mombasa. .

When I was there, there was talk about creating a small consulate system, where you would have one person on the ground with a secure fax. Read and burn – keeping no files. I thought that made eminent sense for a place like Mombasa, but it didn't happen. Instead the Department decided to close the consulate, which I said at the time was an unwise decision.

Q: Your kids are still pretty young at this time. Where did they go to school?

SCHMIEL: They went to the local British school on the mainland where we lived, Mombasa Academy. It used the British system, and my kids had to wear what I thought were silly uniforms. But that was fine, especially for the girls, since it reduced the competition and envy.

They enjoyed and thrived in the system. Both of them were in the top five of their classes at the end of two years. This is where my son discovered his real interest and capability in science. The British system, as I observed it, is one in which if you do well, you are coddled and encouraged. If you don't do well, they don't seem to care. You will drop off at a certain time along the way and become a plumber, a janitor, or a shop person. It's a system that moves ahead and doesn't mind if you can't keep up. So our children kept up and they thrived.

Q: Most of the other students were missionary kids or the kids of business people.

SCHMIEL: Some missionaries, but mostly local, Indian and White. There were very few black Africans.

I also became involved in the school. I volunteered to be the basketball coach. The fact that my son was the best player helped. Of course, I wanted him to be the point guard. He was the tallest kid, but also the only one who knew how to be a point guard.

One of the stories in the book we wrote about our Foreign Service life is about that. The title is No Coaching from the Sidelines. Soon after the game started I began calling out instructions to my team.

The referee came over to me and said, "No coaching from the sidelines."

I looked at him and said, "Where should I coach from?"

He responded that during the game in international basketball, the coach is not allowed to say anything to his players.

This was news to me.

My players needed to be told what to do, trust me, so I subtly disregarded the referee's instructions.

Q: Your boy must have also found trips to the ship interesting.

SCHMIEL: Both of our children did. They did a lot of that in Djibouti also. There, you could drive up and walk on. In Mombasa, as regards the carriers, the children came out with us on the helos, so that was really a great experience for them.

My son and I also played a lot of golf in Mombasa in our spare time. In fact, he learned how to play golf there and was later on the golf team in high school. He also became an engineer ultimately, so his academic experience in the strenuous British school system in Mombasa was instrumental in launching him in that career.

Q: What was your next assignment and how did you organize it?

SCHMIEL: I thought it was time to be an Office Director or a Deputy Office Director at least. I got a call one night about 1:00 in the morning from Tony Dalsimer who said, "Would you like to be the deputy in AF/C, Central African Affairs?"

I said, "Tony, I'm very interested in that. But did you know it's 1:30 in the morning here?" He had clearly forgotten.

Q: And the Central African countries consisted of…

SCHMIEL: Chad, Rwanda, Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic, and Zaire were the largest nations. Most of these were admittedly minimally important countries. The key issue at the time was that Zaire was a key supporter in the war in Angola. (There was a civil war in Angola and a conflict in Namibia). It was all related to our attempts to solve the issue of getting the South Africans out of Namibia, and the Cubans out of Angola.

About a week after I got back to Washington to take up this position, the first of the several massacres took place in Rwanda and Burundi. Half a million people were killed. This is the one in 1988.

Q: How did it get started and what was our reporting?

SCHMIEL: Better people than I have tried to understand. Some incident starts it off. Suddenly, it's just like wildfire as Hutus kill the Tutsis and vice versa. Appalling, especially since it has happened several times in recent memory.

Q: In this case, the embassy is reporting on this and you are getting that at the desk.

SCHMIEL: I was at the desk for three days I think.

Things calmed down soon after, and I went out on my first visit to the countries a few weeks later. I talked to people and counseled calm. You could just sense the tension in both countries.

Q: From the desk perspective, the embassy is reporting this, how are you handling the issue? What is the State Department's procedure? How does it channel this information?

SCHMIEL: We counseled calm. We didn't send any troops, but we did send in some assistance. At the time, it was considered primarily a Belgian problem since these were former Belgian colonies and the Belgians still had small contingents of troops there. I can tell you that by the end of this crisis, the Belgians were giving very strong signals that they had had enough, and they were hoping to wash their hands of the whole thing.

They didn't. We wouldn't let them. Eventually, the Belgians slowly but surely had less influence, and the French became the dominant influence, as they still are today.

Q: Yet, when a circumstance like this comes up and you're looking for pillars of stability, what we were doing was telling the Belgians they couldn't back out, they had to step up. You were probably drafting cables of instructions to other capitals seeking stability and quieting the situation.

SCHMIEL: Yes, especially to Brussels to tell the Belgian Government that we expected them to continue to take the lead there.

Q: Was this the kind of event that would have resulted in inter-agency meetings?

SCHMIEL: You would think so, but in fact only State and DOD were engaged. The UN was involved too. In the U.S. State had the lead and nobody else was much interested yet. By comparison to the next Rwanda-Burundi conflagration that made all the headlines, this was kind of a non-event, oddly enough.

Q: Let's go back a minute. You are coming into the Office of Central African Affairs as the Deputy Director. Who was the Director?

SCHMIEL: Tony Dalsimer was the Director.

Q: Who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of Central Africa?

SCHMIEL: At first it was Ken Brown, and later Irv Hicks.

Q: How was the office organized then? How many people did you have?

SCHMIEL: AF/C had a director, deputy director, and six desk officers. There was one for Rwanda, Burundi, and Central African Republic. The one for Gabon and Sao Tome and Principe was Tom Shannon, who was most recently Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, later Ambassador to Brazil, and now Counselor of the Department. One officer did Chad, because of the civil war going on there and our interest in fighting back against Qadhafi and the Libyans, who were trying to take over Chad.

The Assistant Secretary was Herman (Hank) Cohen.

Q: What might a typical day look like?

SCHMIEL: Unlike Rhodesia, we didn't have press guidance very often. We were dealing with a lot of AID issues, especially with assistance in Cameroon, Gabon, and Central African Republic. Zaire was important for our interests, and a key objective was keeping Mobutu in line, keeping him from overspending his money, much of which was provided by the World Bank-IMF in a Structural Adjustment Program.

One key U.S. focus was Zaire's influence in keeping UNITA (National Union for Total Independence of Angola) supplied. Jonas Savimbi, UNITA's leader, was our man in Angola fighting against the government.

Q: That was an activity in which the Cubans were players, so that would have gotten some attention from the department and the Latin American Bureau.

SCHMIEL: That was a carryover from Chet Crocker's tenure as Assistant Secretary. His negotiations ultimately got an agreement for the South Africans to leave and give independence to Namibia and the Cubans to leave Angola. The negotiation bore fruit after he left the office, but was one that was very important for that region, especially since the final agreement was hosted by Denis Sassou Nguesso, who was the President of the People's Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Because he hosted the final meetings, he was later the first African leader invited for a state visit under President George Herbert Walker Bush.

Q: That's interesting, because you're on the desk. You have an American election with a new president. Did the desk get involved in transition papers for the new staff? Baker becomes the Secretary of State in January 1989.

SCHMIEL: Hank Cohen came in then. He had been the NSC (National Security Council) Africa person.

Not much change, because it was the Vice President becoming President. There was a different Secretary of State, but I don't particularly remember any great activity because there was so much continuity.

Q: In February 1990, the President of the Congo comes for the first state visit of the Bush Administration?

SCHMIEL: The first African. President Bush liked state visits.

Q: Let me start this out then. State visits are a well parceled out commodity. So, how did you get on the list of state visits that the White House would approve of? My understanding is State makes suggestions that it would be nice if you would host these state visits. So, how did the President of the Congo get on the list?

SCHMIEL: First of all, when he hosted the Angola-Namibia agreement, he was told that at some point he might be invited for an official visit. A few months later, President Babangida of Nigeria was invited for a state visit and the arrangements were all in motion when, eleven days before the state visit, he cancelled.

So the White House contacted the Africa bureau to ask who might substitute for him. The response was that Denis Sassou Nguesso had been promised such a visit, so he became the substitute.

This was ten days before the scheduled date of the visit. Given the nature of presidential schedules, the visiting president would have to adapt to our president's schedule, and not vice versa.

As I recount in our book about life in the Foreign Service, the word came down from Hank Cohen that we should invite Denis Sassou Nguesso. I was told to call our Ambassador Len Shurtleff to do the inviting.

An hour after my call to him, Len called me back to say that Sassou-Nguesso would be pleased to come.

So we had ten days to prepare for a state visit.

Q: State visits are quite complicated events actually.

SCHMIEL: Exactly. Plus, Tony Dalsimer was traveling in the region and wouldn't be in Washington for it, and Irv Hicks, the Deputy Assistant Secretary, was on vacation. So the second tour junior officer who was the desk officer for the Congo, Michael Feldman, and I, with Hank Cohen, the Assistant Secretary, did all the preparations for this visit. To say the least, I knew we would be busy!

After advising Hank Cohen that Sassou-Nguesso would come, I called the Office of Protocol to advise them of the visit, noting that the country and president had been changed, but the visit was still going to be in ten days.

The protocol office was, not surprisingly, startled. They responded that it would be impossible to change everything at that late date since they needed at least six weeks to prepare.

I responded that unless they wanted to tell President Bush that he should rescind the invitation, we would have to move ahead regardless.

They gulped and agreed – what choice did any of us have?

It was a very frantic ten days. We had to not only put together all the briefing papers and write all the speeches, but also we had to deal with three different "beltway bandits," local lobbyists who were hired by the Congolese to help them because their embassy was totally inexperienced. In the end these lobbyists proved to be of little use.

One of the broader issues we had to deal with was that the Congolese were anxious that the two presidents have an agreement or two to sign -- but at that point, we didn't have any agreements in place.

It was crazy, but we got it done.

Q: We were talking about all the individual pieces that have to be put together that have to be made for a state visit. When you read about it in the paper, it looks like, of course, people show up in cars, and so on. How much work is it? And who do you work with?

SCHMIEL: It's a great deal of work normally over a six-week period, which we compressed into 10 days.

As I noted earlier, the Congolese were anxious to sign some agreements during the visit. The one that was eventually signed was a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT). The process leading to its signature is an example of conscientious bureaucracy meeting up with expediency.

First, the Congolese embassy told me that the DRC government would sign any agreement at all, irrespective of its contents, as long as we assured that it was in their interest. We had been discussing the BIT for some time, but it had stalled, in part because there was no urgency attached to it. So I called the Economics Bureau to ask if it could expedite matters, but they insisted that the DRC had to understand what it was signing. In the end we and the embassy assured them that that was the case.

We also had to write the usual briefing papers and speeches, and provide protocol lists, including making suggestions for the guest list for the state dinner. . Essentially the desk officer, Michael Feldman, and I did everything.

Q: There was probably a group of people above you who had to clear what you were doing, the Assistant Secretary, the NSC (National Security Council), protocol.

SCHMIEL: Right, but with much of what we were doing, we were the only ones who really knew anything about the issues. We were sending things to the White House. They were putting together all the briefing books for the President. We were doing equivalent briefing books for the Deputy Secretary, Lawrence Eagleburger, who would be hosting at State in the absence of Secretary Baker.

As part of this process, I remember the White House people called and said, "We are putting a list together for the state dinner." They had a list prepared for the Nigerians anyway, so there was a lot of overlap. They said, "We also have 10 spots for people to come to the second part, the entertainment. Do you have more people to put on that list?"

I responded that my wife and I would be pleased to be on that list, so we got to go to the state dinner, part two.

Q: Why are you calling that part two?

SCHMIEL: That's what they called it, because it was solely for the entertainment after the dinner, i.e. for the dancing and to listen to Peter Nero, who would be playing for the program.

There was another aspect which allowed several of my staff to attend the affair. There was a need for interpreters, because most of the Congolese officials did not speak any English, only French or their native language. I appointed all of our desk officers, all of whom spoke French, to be interpreters at the state dinner. This meant that there would be one of them at each of the main tables.

They had a little stool between the chairs. They were not to eat. They were not to drink. They were interpreters only. They were appreciative of being part of the state visit.

In the end all worked out well. We signed the agreements. Everyone went home happy; and Sassou Nguesso naively thought he would be our closest friend in Africa thereafter.

He was an interesting character. He had come to power as a military officer in a coup. He was later voted out of power in a free and fair election. A few years later, he formed another military coup and took power again, and was re-elected. So he has been president most of the last 30 years, twice coming to power in a military coup.

Q: You had state dinners and mass slaughter. What other interesting issues did you deal with?

SCHMIEL: We were dealing with Zaire and its leader Mobutu Sese Sekou. There was a very close alliance with him because he kept the peace in Zaire and in the region. It was very much a situation of après moi, le déluge (after me, the deluge), which is what happened later on. He was a crook, but he was an efficient and strong crook who helped us in our national interests in the region, including in Angola.

I made three trips out to the region during my tenure in this office. I would go out through Brussels and come back through Paris, or vice versa, because we were always

liaising very closely with the Belgians and the French. They were the dominant post-colonial influences in that region.

During my time there, the Government of Chad was overthrown. Hissène Habré was the president and he was overthrown by rebels, who were supported by the Libyans. Idriss Déby, who is president today, came to power via the coup.

I remember going to a meeting at the CIA a few days before Habré was overthrown, and the National Intelligence Officer for Africa said, "Habré is going to hold out. We think the rebels will be defeated."

The analysts' crystal ball was quite clouded, obviously.

Q: In the thing with Chad, since this is a thread that comes into present time, who were the rebels and why does Libya support them?

SCHMIEL: The rebels were led by Déby, who is still the president. Qadhafi always wanted to dominate Chad. Remember this was not that long after President Reagan sent in the planes attacking Libya, so he wasn't really happy about that. As of 2010, however, Gaddafi became our friend and Libya was on the Security Council. A few years later, his overthrow was, sadly, yet another case of "après moi, le deluge."

So AF/C was a calm place, relatively speaking. It was not a central focus of American policy. It became so later when Rwanda and Burundi blew up with mass genocide, but that was later, after my time.

Q: To illustrate your point that it may not have been the center of the American universe, in August 1990, Iraq invades Kuwait, and you have that whole issue unfolding. I'm sure it drew the attention of most of the building. In fact, down where you were, you probably felt, not abandoned, but isolated. Will anybody answer our phone calls?

SCHMIEL: We did our day-to-day work regarding relations with the countries. We kept chugging along.

I should note that we, like every other desk, remained active with completing the annual human rights reports. In most of the AF/C countries, human rights were not very strong. The situation was especially difficult in Zaire. But we didn't want to make Mobutu too unhappy, while still being truthful about the dismal rights situation.

Q: How is that? What is the process for writing that human rights report?

SCHMIEL: Every year, the embassy does the first draft.

Q: So it's a set template.

SCHMIEL: They send it in to the Human Rights Bureau and to the regional bureau at the same time. The Human Rights Bureau usually does the next draft. That's when the discussions begin.

For every one of the countries we dealt with, the issue always was if it was a preeminent and important country that has other benefits to the United States, to its national interests, do you pull your punches? Or how far do you pull them while not doing disservice to the interests of humanitarianism, of being accurate about the human rights situation. In the end, each year we reached agreement, but it wasn't easy.

Q: Were there a lot of meetings?

SCHMIEL: Many, and everyone had his thesaurus at hand in search of "just the right word" to describe a situation or event.

It rarely got up to a higher level. We usually let the senior people know what was going on. They didn't want to get involved in fighting over adjectives.

Q: In 1991, you left the AF Bureau and took a position in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau. How did you go about getting that assignment?

SCHMIEL: Jerry Lanier, who later became Ambassador to Uganda, was the desk officer for South Korea. He and I had studied Swahili together and he had been in Nairobi when I was in Mombasa. He called me up and said that the person who had been assigned to be the deputy director for the Korea desk, Margaret McMillion, had been instead assigned to the Under Secretary for Political Affair's Office, as the Under Secretary's person for Asia.

So the position was opened. He wondered if I was interested in it.

Q: It suddenly opened then?

SCHMIEL: Yes. It was quite late in the assignment cycle, in February. At the time I had no onward assignment, so I was quite open to the possibility.

At the time I had had no Asia experience. I had never ever been to Asia, not even as a tourist. But the position would involve a significant element of pol-mil issues, including dealing with North Korea, and my pol-mil experience was extensive. I talked to Chuck Kartman, who was coming in as the director. He said that he wanted someone who had been a manager – which I had been.

Q: That's a major point. The skills one uses in Washington as a desk officer, director, or whatnot, are different skills than being at a post.

SCHMIEL: Yes, I just had the experience of being a deputy director, and being in the building didn't hurt either. Also, after 11 years in African affairs, other than the congressional fellowship, I thought it was time for a change, to learn something new. I was offered and took the position as Deputy Director of the Korea Desk.

It was one of the most interesting and busy times in my career and on the Korean peninsula too.

Q: As you come into that assignment, would you describe how the desk was organized?

SCHMIEL: Of the six people on the "desk," we had a director, a deputy director, one person who did North Korea, one person who did South Korea, and two people who did economics. We were in an office suite with the Philippines Desk, which had seven people. At the time, I said to myself – and this was after Marcos was gone – maybe the Philippines and U.S. relations are more important, but I don't think they have enough people on the Korea Desk for the immense amount of work we had to do. I was proven right quickly.

In that sense, it was a small office for a very multifaceted relationship, especially since early on in my tenure there, it was determined that we would take a new initiative and move toward the very first political meetings with the North Koreans. We were going to invite them to get together, come to the UN, sit down and try to create a path to better relations, with a primary focus on preventing the North Koreans from having a nuclear capability.

At the time the bureau was actively involved in doing something similar with Vietnam, engaging in a road map toward improved relations, with a primary focus on the issues of POW-MIAs (Prisoners of War, Missing in Action).

The bureau didn't want to use exactly the same terminology for North Korea, but that's exactly what it was going to be: saying that we wanted to improve relations, setting out a progression of steps: if you do this, we will do this.

Q: Increasing confidence as you moved along.

SCHMIEL: Right, but focusing first on the nuclear issue. The North Koreans were, from what we understood, moving very rapidly even then towards nuclear capability, which was a great fear. The international state of war on the Korean peninsula continued then, as it continues today, but the issue of dealing with their nuclear capability through inspections was going to be the first issue for discussion, as far as the U.S. was concerned. .

Q: Where does the political direction for this new policy, on the American side, come from?

SCHMIEL: From the Assistant Secretary and higher. That was Richard Solomon; Arnie Cantor was the Under Secretary. Larry Eagleburger was Deputy Secretary, and James Baker was Secretary. The principal Deputy Assistant Secretary was Desaix Anderson, with whom the Korea Desk would work most closely.

I started in August and by September or October, we were talking about inviting the North Koreans to New York to launch our new initiative. During that time also, the South and North were talking about creating their own bilateral discussion fora; and in November, as part of the confidence-building related to these talks, President Roh Tae Woo announced there were no nuclear weapons in South Korea.

Q: The Bush Administration neither confirmed nor denied, but allowed the South Koreans to make this statement, which they neither confirmed nor denied.

SCHMIEL: We wrote press guidance. We twisted ourselves inside out in our verbiage, but we implicitly said that this was the state of the situation, without breaking the policy.

Q: We took nuclear weapons off...

SCHMIEL: So you say.

That was in November. Then the North Koreans and the South Koreans met for the first time themselves in December and reached a series of agreements. We and the North Koreans met for the first time in January 1992.

I was the drafter of the talking points which would set out our policy to be read to and handed over to the North Koreans at the meeting. It would be read by the Under Secretary, who would chair the meeting. In formulating the points, I remembered what I had taught at A-100, the power of the drafter. After an arduous inter-agency process, the policy paper was finally done. I thought.

Then, Arnie Kanter, the Under Secretary who would be delivering the points, with Dick Solomon at his side, decided to edit the points during his train trip up to New York.

Thinking ahead, we had sent the points to our UN mission, so that when Kanter arrived, they were able to take his changes and include them in a final text, which was handed over. This was a time when word processing was in its infancy, but at least there was enough capability to carry out this process.

Q: It illustrates that at that level and with those kinds of issues how the leadership sometimes takes the lead, whatever is required, to move the policy along.

SCHMIEL: That began the very first meeting with the North Koreans. We've been meeting with them, on and off, ever since. I guess it's more off at the moment. It's a very peculiar relationship.

Q: At that time, Kim Il-sung was still there.

SCHMIEL: Yes, the Great Leader was still with us. Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il was still waiting in the wings. And the current leader, Kim Jong-Un was a complete unknown.

For a while, there was some optimism that things would actually move ahead. As usual with the North Koreans, it was up and down. There are certain comparisons between Ian Smith and the North Koreans. They play a weak hand very skillfully. They rarely offer anything. They just wait to react to whatever we offer, just as Smith did.

Other than this issue, I was also responsible for pol-mil issues related to the South Koreans. This included the annual meetings of the two nations' defense ministers, the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM), which was to be in Seoul that December. That was one of my first trips to Asia, to go out for the meeting with the Secretary of Defense, a fellow named Dick Cheney.

Q: Did he recognize you?

SCHMIEL: He sure did. His secretary from the congressional days was his secretary at the Department of Defense, and all of us had a nice time recalling our time in the House. I have a great picture with Cheney from that time also.

Q: That must have been interesting to your State Department fellows that you're so well connected.

SCHMIEL: The picture of me shaking hands with him at the meeting in Seoul was taken at a cocktail party. I tell people that about a second after the picture was taken, Colin Powell, who was then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, walked over. So the three of us had a nice chat.

Q: In one sense, this is an illustration that at that level of deputy director on a very active desk, you have to interact with a broad range of people in other agencies and whatnot. Of course, that is a primary skill.

SCHMIEL: Yes, up to and including the Secretary of Defense.

Q: When you were out there that time, you must have seen U.S. Forces Korea's compound in Seoul. Did you get a chance to get up to the border, Panmunjom?

SCHMIEL: Yes. I made four trips to Korea during the two years on the desk. During one of them I went up to Panmunjom by helo. I stepped across the border around the table, and waved to the North Korean guards on the other side. During the visit we met with the Armistice Commission people and all the others.

I was pleased that I was working on the affairs of two nations to which, unlike Central Africa, people actually paid attention. It was a matter of considerable focus by the administration.

Until that time, our communications with the North Koreans consisted of messages that were exchanged by the political counselors of the two embassies in Beijing. They would meet, each would hand over points, but they were never discussed because there were no instructions re having discussions beyond handing over the points and making sure you got the points from the other side. It was a very stilted and stagnant relationship, as opposed to this one where we were actually sitting down and talking to one another.

Q: I was going to say it sounds even more stilted than the U.S. contacts with the Chinese in the Warsaw embassies. That used to be the one place that we would talk to the Chinese.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: You are absolutely right that one of the major components of the U.S.-South Korean relationship is the military one. You have the 2nd Army stationed there, so pol-mil issues pop up all the time. You must have been in constant contact with the embassy. What kinds of things would come up?

SCHMIEL: One constant problem was how to move U.S. forces out of the city of the burgeoning Seoul, to remove them as a possible irritant. That, and preparing for the next SCM, as well as working to make sure we and the South were in agreement on how to deal with the North on the nuclear issue, were major foci of my work days.

I should note here that one of the things that gave me greatest pleasure while working on the Korea desk was when the diplomats from the South Korean Embassy would, during our discussions, express their gratitude to the United States for all the things we had done for them. We don't get enough thank you's, and I appreciated that.

Q: The Korean Embassy in the U.S. is fairly substantial.

SCHMIEL: Yes, at one point Ban Ki-moon, now the UN Secretary General, was the embassy political counselor. We dealt closely with him then and also when he went back to Seoul to head the America Division of the foreign ministry. He is clearly a very capable man.

Q: How plugged into the Washington policy scene was the Korean Embassy?

SCHMIEL: I think they were very good, very effective. I think the Koreans knew that their issue was a major issue, and that they could come to see us whenever they wanted to, at a variety of levels. Usually, it was the political counselor and his deputy who would come to us on the desk. Every once in a while, Ban Ki Moon would come over, too.

Q: Some of the Asian embassies are sophisticated enough to notice the separation of powers in the American government. They actually interact with the Congress. Would you put the Korean Embassy as one of those who made an effort to touch base with the Congress?

SCHMIEL: They did, to some extent. They certainly were considered among our strongest allies, for very good reason, and they had the Hill on their side.

The people who worked the Hill the best probably were the Taiwanese. One thing I found when I went to work for Senator Murkowski the second time was that Senator Murkowski was Taiwan's favorite senator by far. He was their closest friend, as is his daughter, who is the new senator.

Q: One of the things that evolved in the U.S.-Korean relationship over the years was the Koreans were trying to control the cost of having a military by getting us to allow them to manufacture U.S. military equipment and goods. That's the kind of thing that would come up at the SCM from time to time.

In fact, let's look at one of those SCMs. Can you talk about what it took to do the papers, brief the delegation, and get it all together? I presume this is not on the level of a presidential visit like we've just discussed, but it is a major manpower consumer for the desk.

SCHMIEL: Less so on the side of State, because it was a DoD issue. We would talk to the DoD people and the JCS people. Our role was to draft and clear the official joint statement to be issued at the end of the meeting by the two ministers. Probably 98 percent of it was a reiteration of our close relationship and cooperation, etcetera, added to new elements about draw downs of troops or dealing with the North Koreans or exercises. At that time we were becoming increasingly insistent about the Koreans paying more for the assistance we gave them in the form of our troops.

Q: For an SCM, the delegation was led by the Secretary of Defense?

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: Who would have been the equivalent rank in the State Department?

SCHMIEL: The Principal East Asia Bureau Deputy Assistant Secretary was the highest ranking State Department official, and I was next.

Q: The succeeding SCM would have been held in Washington.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: Again, there would be lots of planning to find dates, get the principals free, paperwork.

SCHMIEL: I remember that. Ban Ki Moon was here as head of the America Department at the time. At a cocktail party at Blair House, we were all in a corner rewriting the text and reaching an agreement. I looked over at the cocktail table, and there was Dick Cheney, the Secretary of Defense, getting his drink and nibbling at the cocktail table, all by himself.

I went over and we had a good chat. This was in October or November 1992, just before the election, and I asked him his thoughts about the upcoming presidential election. He admitted that things were not looking good for President Bush.

Obviously, after the election, there was the transition. We then were active in preparing for the new leadership, writing briefing papers, briefing new people. The last change of an administration had been an easy one because it was within the same party. Now, it was a new party with none of the same people, so we expected some difficulties.

Q: Did you experience what some people have described as the advance team of the new administration? They come in and order people around. "We want this paper. We want that paper."

SCHMIEL: There was very little of that on the Korea desk. There was a transition team in the building. We wrote papers for them. My impression early on and in the reality of the first six months of the new administration was that the policy changed hardly at all. It was very much a continuation of trying to meet with the North Koreans, advancing on the nuclear issue, trying to get them to implement the terms of the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty), allow inspections, etcetera.

Q: Would it be fair to say that these transition papers that were prepared were basically summaries of what had gone before and attempts to describe policy thrusts, so that the new guys would understand a little more closely what the intent and what the accomplishment had been?

SCHMIEL: Right, just to bring them up to speed on where we were. Obviously, you had the experts and expertise in the new group. Some of them, political people, had worked the issues, had been in think tanks, or on the political side. In that sense, I think they knew the general thrust of the policy. They just needed some more details and that's what we supplied.

Winston Lord came in as Assistant Secretary.

Q: With a new administration, you get a new front office. As you say, Win Lord came in as Assistant Secretary. Did the deputy assistant secretaries shuffle around?

SCHMIEL: Yes. The one we dealt with mainly now was Lynn Pascoe, who stayed on for a while. Lynn subsequently became Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for Political Affairs, number three at the UN.

The interesting thing was that just before I left in July, 1993, we had arranged for another meeting with the North Koreans to try to make more progress on the nuclear issue. During that year, under the new administration, the Political-Military bureau took over the leadership of dealing with the North Koreans because of the nuclear issue. Thus, when we went to New York to meet with the North Koreans, PM's Assistant Secretary

Bob Carlucci was in the chair as the lead. Tom Hubbard, who replaced Lynn Pascoe, was the chief representative from EAP.

I went to the meeting because Office Director Chuck Kartman had agreed to a second honeymoon with his wife in Jamaica. They had booked all the tickets, so he could not go to New York. Also, Chuck had been assigned as DCM to Seoul, while I had been assigned as DCM to Reykjavik, so were both "short timers."

I went to the meeting and came back the next day after writing a short report of my impressions. The day after that, I got on the plane to go to Reykjavik for my new assignment as DCM/Charge'.

Here's an interesting little vignette. During the time on the desk, I had attended a conference where some North Korean diplomats, who were then "assigned" to a think tank there and thus eligible for a visa, participated. The conference was at George Washington University and the host was Gaston Sigur, who had previously been Assistant Secretary for East Asia. I gave a short paper about our policy, and we had a chance to sit down, have a cup of coffee and chat with the North Koreans. One of them was named Li Gun, who at various times had been the head of the America desk at the North Korean foreign ministry. At one point during our discussions, he said, "You know, if you offered us light water reactors, we probably would stop the nuclear program."

I went back and reported the conversation, but it got no positive reaction. Ironically, about a year and a half later, that was our policy.

Q: He turned out to be one of the major negotiators on the North Korean side.

SCHMIEL: And he still is. In fact, not surprisingly he was at the meeting in New York. During a coffee break there, after we had renewed our acquaintance, I remember him saying to me, almost offhandedly, that someday we would be allies. I looked at him quizzically, and he said we and the South Koreans would be the North's allies against the "real enemy."

He didn't say who that was, but I think I knew that he meant Japan. It was a very interesting, unprompted comment. Or perhaps it was prompted?

Q: It strikes me that what you have is a great illustration that important diplomatic moves can be made in quite informal settings. You sometimes look to create those informal settings.

I'm recalling a basketball story of yours, which again is an informal setting in which one learns a great deal about the other side. Why don't you tell it?

SCHMIEL: We were at the conference...

Q: This was the academic conference.

SCHMIEL: At the academic conference, I saw John Merrill, who was the INR (Intelligence and Research Bureau) specialist on Korea, and still is.

He said the North Koreans wanted us to come to their hotel room to discuss relevant issues. We did so for a while, but suddenly Li Gun said, "Stop. Wait. Can't talk. The Bulls are on. We've got to watch Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen."

So we stopped everything, and we watched the NBA (National Basketball Association) game with no more talk.

Of course, he knew about that because the North Koreans were stealing the signals from ESPN and all the cable channels, for the elite so they could watch the NBA, CNN, and all the other things. He was a number one fan of Michael Jordan.

I duly mentioned this to people at State when I came back, in addition to Li's comments about light water reactors. It was interesting that when Secretary of State Albright went to visit North Korea a few years later, one of the gifts she gave to Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il was an NBA basketball, autographed by Michael Jordan. That kind of closed the loop. I'm sure he was delighted.

Q: It points out if you pay attention, there are little ways to create opening spaces.

SCHMIEL: Find some commonality, like the greatness of Michael Jordan.

Q: There you go.

Is there anything else you would like to cover on the Korea desk? It was such a busy time. Literally, that is one of the busiest and most important offices in all of Asia Pacific.

SCHMIEL: I know that a few years later, I went to desk and discovered that they now had 16 people. I always knew we had too much work for six!

I remember just before Chuck Hartman and I left, only two of the six on the desk were going to be there. The bureau brought in others to help fill in. John Merrill volunteered to help and be the de facto director and deputy director while Chuck and I were going here and there. After a week of this, he said to me, "How the hell do you guys do this? The constant demands for paper, calls, and things are going on. At INR, it's so calm and serene. I've been here a week and I'm worn out. I'm exhausted."

He had never done the kind of work we did on a desk – very fast-paced. He was really overwhelmed. We who had done it had adapted to the regimen, but I could see how difficult it was for him.

Q: I think the herding cats analogy fits with busy desks that have major policy responsibilities, such as the Korea desk.

SCHMIEL: Yes, it was a good change for me from the Africa bureau. I thought that by the end of two years, we had made significant progress in policy terms, but with the North Koreans, one never knows. As I said, I still joke with my students that it's like playing poker. They deal the cards and you've got five cards with four aces. Kim Jong-il only has two cards, but they are both jokers. You don't know what the hell he is going to do next. They are keeping us on our toes, and on our heels.

Q: I would suspect that if all your job is to keep the other guy off balance, that's fairly easy. Any two-year old, any four-year old, can drive his parents crazy. But that doesn't necessarily mean the child is going to always be a two-year old.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: Today is Wednesday, January 27th, 2010. We are returning to our conversation with Gene Schmiel.

We had just stopped, as he was Deputy Director of the Office of Korean Affairs. You were talking about this last meeting with Gallucci there, and the difference between the Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration. As you saw it was not much, save that the PM Bureau began to be the lead office in State for North Korea. Why did that shift?

SCHMIEL: It's difficult for me to say. The Clinton Administration came in on January 20th. In the first couple of months, it was clear to me that the policy was not really going to change that much.

As I recall, about March or April, there must have been a high-level meeting. One day, I came in and was told that PM, the Political Military Bureau, would take the lead in State for the negotiations with North Korea on the nuclear issue; EAP would no longer be the lead office. I knew nothing about it until it was done. So we saluted and carried on.

Q: Who was the Assistant Secretary for PM then at that time?

SCHMIEL: Robert Gallucci.

Q: Gallucci himself?

SCHMIEL: Gallucci was Assistant Secretary. Robert Einhorn was the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. This is why in early or mid-June 1993, when we arranged a meeting with the North Koreans in New York at the U.N., we were going to try to kick-start and move ahead on the nuclear issue with the new leadership. Mr. Gallucci would be in the chair. I went to the meeting as the junior EAP representative. Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Hubbard was at the main table. I was at the back table, taking notes, etcetera.

Two days after this meeting, I was scheduled to be on a plane to go to my next assignment in Reykjavik, Iceland. I came back to the department the next day and wrote my report. I went home and finished packing my bags, got on the plane, and left. It was kind of a hurried and flurried ending to my tenure on the Korea desk.

We had a little intra-department drama before the meeting worth relating. Before the meeting we had gone to brief the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Peter Tarnoff. He was a retired FSO, who was brought back by the Clinton Administration.

We told him that we would be hosting the North Koreans for a lunch as part of the process, which was normal protocol with Koreans. Not doing so would have been considered an insult. The Under Secretary was very unhappy with that and thought we shouldn't do it, given the nature of the North Korean state.

With my vast two years of Korean experience, I explained to him that if we didn't, everything would fall apart. It was part of the social ritual with the Koreans. He finally agreed.

I also remember that at the meeting, during a coffee break, I had another chat with Li Gun. I joked with him that I had been working with a country, South Korea, where an American military officer was in charge of the forces and I was going to another country, Iceland, where also an American military officer, a one-star Admiral, was in charge of the forces. He took the point.

As for the talks, later there was considerable progress that day and eventually agreement on the "agreed framework" for resolving the nuclear issue, but that was after my time on the desk. And that process fell apart, as they all have to date, unfortunately.

Q: That's an interesting thing you were talking about; in the discussions with the North Koreans, we ended up with an agreed framework.

SCHMIEL: That's what it was.

Q: How were those agreements perceived by both sides?

SCHMIEL: As in all agreements, they are designed to find compromise, bases of accord.

At that time, giving up a nuclear program was very easy for them, because they didn't have that much of one.

Back in January 1992, when we first presented the talking points to the North Koreans at our first meeting in New York, progress on the nuclear issue was the first of those steps for improved relations. Everything else depended on moving ahead on that. Every other issue depended upon resolving that one.

Q: You made a comment that one of the North Korean objectives was to have a full-blown relationship with the United States. For the purpose of elbowing the South Koreans out of the way, that would turn the South Koreans into an American colony?

SCHMIEL: Certain parts of the North Korean mentality are difficult to divine, but this one is clear. The North Koreans believe that having signed the Armistice, having been therefore recognized as the "official" Government of Korea before the war, that therefore they really are and always have been and always will be the only Government of Korea. This is one of those little fictions, which obviously the United States never had any intention of accepting, but the North Koreans saw our agreement as a step in that direction. Sometimes countries fool themselves, just like people, into believing things that aren't really true.

Q: One of the things that arose during the time that you were on the desk was in late 1992. Not only did the U.S. have elections, but also there were Korean elections in December. Kim Young-Sam was the winning candidate. How did the embassy report on that election? What was the view of the desk as to what was at stake in these elections?

SCHMIEL: As I recall, it was a sure thing. There was no doubt he was going to be elected. In that sense, it wasn't analysis of who was going to win, but an analysis of what KYS (Kim Young-Sam) was going to do when he became president. He was a well-known figure in Korea, well known to the embassy over many, many years. I think continuity was the theme and we didn't foresee much of a change.

Again, Roh Tae Woo, in his last year, having announced that there were no nuclear weapons in Korea, having begun the negotiations with the North Koreans, having reached some agreements with the North Koreans, all of those were significant departures from the past. We understood that KYS was going to be pretty much continuing on the same pattern.

I should mention one other issue I dealt with in which I made a small contribution to our policy. At the time we wanted to get the North Koreans to help with the return of the remains of MIAs from the Korean War. Their initial position was that they would return remains for $1 million per body. They returned one set of remains and demanded payment, which of course we refused. Soon after that I was in Hawaii for talks with the South Koreans about many issues, and I visited CILHI, the forensics lab the U.S. military had for assessing remains. I spoke with one of the doctors, who told me that the North Koreans had in fact sent the remains of one of their citizens, and that what they sent had been "on a shelf" somewhere for many years. In other words, they were testing to see how gullible we were.

During the ensuing discussions over an agreement on returning remains, I suggested to the DOD personnel leading the discussions that the agreement be for the "search for and return of remains," without insisting that Americans be involved in the procedures. I said that while this was insufficient for a final agreement, it could be a solid preliminary agreement laying down a foundation for accord. In fact, the North Koreans agreed, as I thought they would, and in implementing the procedures for the return, they finally agreed to let American experts participate in the process – as I hoped would happen. This all took place in my final days on the desk, and it was one of those elements of diplomatic practice in which I am most pleased to have played a part.

Q: We always like to get a sense of how you went about organizing your next assignment.

SCHMIEL: Right. Well I obviously looked into the bid book and saw that there were a variety of things coming up. I had thought it would be nice to stay on for another year on the Korea desk. The East Asia Bureau thought that was a good idea too, but I had been home for five years and the rules required that I go overseas after that period unless there was an exceptional reason to extend. I had no particularly good reason, so the system required that I have an overseas assignment.

So I began looking around for a variety of things. The East Asia Bureau made me their candidate to be the Consul General in Auckland. The Africa Bureau made me their candidate to be the Consul General in Durban, where I had served earlier.

In the European Bureau, I had a good friend, John Tefft, who was later Ambassador to Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. With John's help, I was the European Bureau's candidate to be DCM in Reykjavik.

All of these were working in the system. I didn't get Auckland, because one of the several women's lawsuits. They were given the choice of positions from this coterie. One of them chose Auckland, so that excluded anyone else from getting it.

Q: What you are talking about is that there was a lawsuit against the Foreign Service…

SCHMIEL: By a group of women, the Alison Palmer suit, which I know very little about, other than the fact that this woman got this job; it was hers for the taking.

Q: The judicial requirement was that State offer things to women first.

SCHMIEL: So she got that.

Then, Durban was an 01 position, i.e. at my rank. The ambassador in Pretoria, Princeton Lyman, wanted his political officer, Pamela Bridgewater, to get this job even though she was under grade and the system allegedly would not permit "stretch assignments." But she did get the job – I knew her as one of my former A-100 students by the way. She later became an ambassador twice. Good for her.

That left the position in Reykjavik.

That reminds me: because I had hoped to extend on the Korea desk, I had not worked hard on a new assignment. Thus, at one point early in 1993, I was more or less "forcibly" assigned as the Labor Officer in Stockholm. This was an 01 position, beginning that summer, and since I had 4/4 Swedish, I was eminently qualified.

So that assignment was on the books, but the nature of the assignment system is that any Consul General or DCM job would break any assignment to lower level jobs. So I was hoping one of these three would work out.

As it turned out ultimately, I was assigned as DCM to Reykjavik, which was a very pleasing outcome. It was a busy summer. Our daughter was going to college for the first time. We moved out of the house. We had to get ready to go. We had her high school graduation, college moving, etcetera, and I had the Korea desk and the first meeting with the North Koreans. It was a busy time, but we survived.

Q: Excellent. You arrive in Reykjavik in the summer of 1993.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: What does the embassy look like at that time? Who was the ambassador?

SCHMIEL: Well there was no ambassador. The ambassador had been a political appointee of President Bush. He went out there and stayed about three months, went home and never returned. And the DCM had left too, so there were a series of chargés in Reykjavik. This was one of the reasons why they wanted me to get out there early, because I would be chargé for at least six months since the administration had not yet nominated anybody to be ambassador by June of that year.

I was DCM and I was chargé. We had a political officer, consular, admin, USIA, a marine contingent. We had a separate USIA library in town, co-located with the Fulbright people. It subsequently closed, unfortunately.

The key issue in our relations with Iceland was the future of the NATO base. Iceland is a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), but has no military forces. However, it does have a bilateral defense agreement with the United States. So the United States is doubly committed to the defense of Iceland.

In one of the peculiarities of history, in March 1941, the United States essentially established a protectorate over Iceland. The British had gone in there in 1939 to take over, mainly to prevent the Germans from having a submarine base in the North Atlantic. In March of 1941, through an agreement with the Icelanders, the United States became the proconsuls. So we have played a prominent role in modern Icelandic history, since 1941.

During the war, Iceland proved to be a key link to the supplies, lend-lease, etcetera, to the British and the Russians.

At the end of the war, there were 100,000 Icelanders and 60,000 American troops on the island. After the war, the number of troops declined. (One result is that there are many Icelandic Americans who were born through the "friendships" of the soldiers and local ladies). A few years later, Iceland joined NATO, and we, i.e. NATO, but primarily the U.S., once again established a base there.

From that point on, our primary policy objective was to keep the NATO base and gin up popular support for it. There was a small anti-war, anti-Western group through the years, very pro-Soviet, who advocated closing the base, but successive governments had succeeded in warding them off.

When on Christmas Day 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the opposition to the base went into rapid decline, because the anti-base people no longer had a Soviet Union to defend in Iceland.

The question for the U.S. was, of course, do we really still need the base since the cold war was over.

The mission program plan of every U.S. embassy, which is an annual product, is designed to underline the national objectives in each country, how they are going to be achieved, what resources are available to achieve them and what additional resources are needed. In Iceland, the number one objective was always to preserve the base as the most fundamental element of the U.S. national interest.

The embassy was very small, 14 Americans, but there were 3,000 United States military at the base at Keflavik, which is co-located with the international airport, about 30 miles from Reykjavik. There were 3,000 navy and air force with probably 2,000 dependents.

Q: In preparation to go out, you must have been briefed by the desk in Washington. Did you also go over to the Pentagon and talk to them about their expectations?

SCHMIEL: Yes, I had extensive discussions with the desk, even as my responsibilities on the Korea Desk continued. The desk officer was, let's just be kind and say inadequate. The key issue was, for the moment, because the Soviet threat no longer existed, what was to be the base's fate. There was no support for closing the base, but there was considerable clamor in DOD, and especially in the Air Force, to take out the 12 Air Force F-5s that were based there, which were the air defense of the nation of Iceland. At the time, the U.S. AF's view was that since there were no longer any Soviets to defend against, those planes and the related Air Force rescue helicopter squadron which accompanied them should be brought back to the United States to save money, etcetera. However, since these planes were Iceland's air defense, any move to remove the planes was surely to be controversial.

Earlier that year the desk officer was called by the Icelandic press and asked about the issue. Instead of saying, as he was supposed to do, that the matter was being negotiated, he instead blurted out, "Oh yes, we are considering taking all the planes out."

So naturally, this had been in the press in Iceland, and their foreign ministry was not pleased either. I learned about the desk officer's indiscretion after I had been assigned, so I knew the situation would be complicated. Fortunately, as I mentioned earlier, John Tefft was the Office Director, and he more or less took over the Iceland account and relegated the desk officer to doing other tasks.

The view of the Pentagon, the view of the air force was that we should remove the planes and the search and rescue unit, which was tied to it. There was a very large search and rescue unit whose function was to rescue the pilots if they crashed on land or in the ocean. During the time they were there, they never rescued a single pilot, but they did rescue dozens of Icelandic fishermen who had had accidents. Given the importance of fishing in the Icelandic economy, this had been a major positive element of our relationship for many years.

Over the years, the search and rescue unit became the best-known part of the base, because they valiantly saved dozens of Icelandic fishermen and received great credit for it. The fellows in that unit told me they loved being there because they welcomed the challenges of the wind, the cold, the sleet and everything else with 30-foot seas. After two years there, they said, any other search and rescue effort anywhere else in the world would be a picnic by comparison.

Early in the spring I had already come to the conclusion that abruptly taking out the planes and the search and rescue unit en masse was not a good policy idea. It was clear that we had to do some reductions and that there was no need for such a large contingent of planes and helos, but I believed at the time that whereas the Icelanders would likely accept a significant cut, a total reduction, even over a lengthy period, was a bad policy choice for both sides.

When I began my consultations on the desk in the spring (I was due to go out in June), I found a draft instruction on the plane issue which was then pending clearance. It said that we would advise the Icelanders that we were going to take the planes and helos out, but were open to negotiations as to how and when. That is, the State Department had in effect already agreed to the DoD position. I asked that that instruction be held off until I had had time to assess the situation at post, and that was agreed.

I went out to post as chargé. I was there two days and had my courtesy call on the prime minister, Davíð Oddsson, who was prime minister for about 18 years, before and after then. He said, among other things, “About a year ago Mr. Schmiel, the ambassador came in and said to me, ‘Mr. Prime Minister, you may have seen that there were AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) planes that used to be based at the base. They flew away. They’re not coming back. We are telling you now after the fact that we no longer have an AWACS unit at the base.’”

Oddsson added at that point, rather firmly, “Mr. Schmiel, that was very upsetting, because as you know, the forces there are the Iceland Defense Force. If I as Prime Minister don’t know that part of my defense force has gone and is not coming back, this is quite upsetting. So let’s hope that doesn’t happen again, Mr. Schmiel.”

I replied, “Mr. Prime Minister, I agree with you. If there is going to be any change, you obviously have to know about it ahead of time; and before that happens, we have to consult openly as NATO allies and reach agreement.”

Then he asked about the rumors that the desk officer had mentioned. I cringed when he said, “We are reading these press reports. Your desk officer said that all the planes are coming out.”

So in responding I probably used terms stronger than “inadequate” for the desk officer, who I really wanted to shove off a cliff. I said, “Well, no final decision has been made.”

He replied by making his case even stronger. He said, “You know, I just returned from a Nordic Prime Ministers meeting. My colleagues from Sweden and Finland said, ‘We understand from the press that Iceland is not going to have an air defense any more. Is that true, Mr. Prime Minister?’

He said, “Mr. Schmiel, that was a very embarrassing conversation. What am I supposed to say to these people when I don’t know about the status of the Iceland Defense Force?”

I told him that I got the point loud and clear and that I would relay that to Washington. I told him that I had no message on the issue at that point, but that we hoped to have a decision soon, after additional discussions.

I reported all this back to Washington. At the time I was in a peculiar situation, because during my first three months there I came back to Washington and went back out three times. Once I came back for my daughter's high school graduation. Then I went out again and came back again, I think it was in August, for meetings with the Icelanders in Washington. We had bilateral meetings to talk about these issues, but did not come to a decision yet. In part that was because I was now introducing into the policy debate my view that DoD's position was the wrong one to take.

During one of those trips back to Washington, Parker Borg, who had been announced as the new ambassador, sat in on the meetings with the Icelanders. I sat at the front table; he sat at the back, because I was the chargé and he was still unconfirmed. He could listen in, but he had no official status. It was one of those diplomatic niceties.

He too was in a peculiar situation. He had just finished studying Burmese for a year, because he was going to be Ambassador to Burma, but that nomination was cancelled, and he was given the ambassadorship to Iceland instead.

Q: So, he is a career officer.

SCHMIEL: Yes.

In any case, as I said before, it had become clear to me that whereas the Defense Department was set on removing the planes, that step would in fact set back relations a very long way. Further, I now came to believe that our proposal to them should be that we wanted to significantly reduce the two units, the planes and the helos, and also to reduce the costs of keeping the base by reducing personnel and asking the Icelanders to pay more. That would be more of a proverbial win-win situation, one which I knew they would be prepared to accept.

One of the peculiarities of having gone back and forth two or three times that year was that while I was back in the Department, I was able to rewrite the instructions to myself, the instructions from the Department of State to the chargé.

This was one of those interesting aspects of dealing with a small country where few people in the national security system in the U.S. are paying much attention. As a result, I essentially was able to write my own instructions to myself and help to get it cleared (reluctantly by DoD and the Air Force). The fact that I was the chargé made all the difference because my authority was respected since I knew the situation in country the best. So, when I returned to post, I knew that in a few days I would be getting a formal instruction which I had, for the most part, written myself.

The admiral in charge at Keflavik, a one-star admiral, Mike Haskins, was pleased at the turn of events, but not when he heard that during the meeting to present our position to the Icelanders, I would be in charge of the meeting, with him sitting at my right hand.

That is, I was going to present with the admiral at my side because I was the superior officer. His view was that it was essential that there be an ambassador or a senior person from the State Department do this. He wasn't happy that just a chargé was going to do it.

I understood his point of view, but I knew that no one at State was prepared at that time to come out to do this – and I told him so. After this, we got along very well, in great part because the problems he saw forthcoming from having the U.S. view presented at such a low level did not ensue.

Before the meeting with the Icelanders, I had the instruction, which had arrived in good time, made into a "non-paper;" that is we presented the points without a heading or other indication that it was the official U.S. position. We had the meeting. I read the points to the Icelandic side.

I wouldn't say they were thrilled at what they likely perceived as a change in policy, but I think they were a little bit happier when I did not tell them that we planned to remove the planes and helos wholesale.

I handed it over, and thus began a series of meetings, back and forth to Washington, about what we were going to do about the planes, what we're going to do about the air force component, how large a reduction would be acceptable, etc.

At the time the air force personnel component was about 800, and the navy was about 2,200. The navy forces were primarily oriented around P-3s, the submarine hunters. The admiral was a P-3 pilot himself.

The Air Force and the Defense Department were very unhappy with me. Words like "clientitis" were used, meaning that some thought I had become more Icelandic than American, and they were not always subtle about it. Their view, which was entirely logical and understandable, was that with the Soviets gone, a severely-weakened Russia was no threat to Iceland. Therefore, they said, Iceland's air defense does not have to be on the spot. We can remove the planes with the search and rescue unit, and bring them back to Norfolk. If there is a problem, they can return to Iceland in three or four hours. Further, in this view, given the expense of keeping people there, personnel costs, the fuel, and everything else, that too argued in favor of removal.

My response, which I also included in formal cables, was, in essence, "I understand your points, and I agree with them 99 percent. But the issue is not the threat; the issue is symbolism. Let me tell you again what Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson said to me: 'This is the Iceland Defense Force. I want to say that I have an air defense. If those planes are gone, I don't have an air defense. What kind of country is that? Don't we have a bilateral defense agreement? Don't we have a NATO agreement?'"

The military authorities responded, in essence, that the Icelanders would eventually come to accept the new reality.

I riposted, "I can tell you that the Icelanders will accept reduced numbers and reduced costs for the base, and that we can use this as an occasion to reduce the facilities, reduce the number of planes, reduce the costs, and have them defray a lot of our costs. But pulling the planes out totally will be a symbolic shot across the bow, a very bad idea which could reap a very long era of bad relations."

I carried the day, because I was there on the spot.

Having won the day on the issue, I knew we would need some sort of written agreement to implement the new reality, i.e. reduced planes, helos, and costs, as well as Icelandic agreement to reduce costs. So I scoured through the embassy's files and I noticed that back in the 1970s, we had a bilateral agreement about the base which we called an Agreed Minute. I looked at it and I got the Department's agreement that that should be the path forward.

I floated it at one of the meetings with the Icelanders, and they too agreed to that approach.

Over the next few months, i.e. September-November 1993, I drafted a basic text, leaving gaps where the substantive agreements would be emplaced. It began by laying out our commitment to our NATO alliance, our bilateral defense agreement, and all the principles, but also noting the end of the Soviet Union. Therefore, it said, it was time to change the relationship to adapt to new circumstances, while making sure that Iceland had an air defense, etcetera.

It became the basis of our discussions in September, October, and November.

By then, Parker Borg had been confirmed and he planned to arrive in December. I had been chargé for about six months. In the meantime, we and the Icelanders had reached

agreement on almost the entire document, but we knew that only at the highest levels of the U.S. could we have a final agreement.

Finally, it was decided that Deputy Secretary of Defense William Perry would come out with a senior Air Force General to look at the facilities and try to reach an agreement and fill in the final blanks.

They came out. We had made our recommendations – Ambassador Borg essentially endorsed my approach. We agreed to a final proposal, but it was going to take a decision on the spot by Deputy Secretary of Defense Perry.

We arranged a meeting at a hotel in town, in a meeting room. We made an arrangement whereby we had the text of the agreement in our system and the Icelanders had it in their system, so that when there was an agreement, they were going to fill in the blanks and print it out, so we would have copies. It was going to be a publicly signed document.

Naturally, there were glitches with machines. But more on that later.

The Foreign Minister, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, led the discussions with Deputy Secretary Perry across the table. The air force general who accompanied Perry did not want any part of leaving any planes there; he made that clear. But Perry proposed reducing the number of planes to four and then reassessing the situation after two years. The search and rescue unit would remain intact, but we would then begin discussions about having the Icelanders fund and create their own search and rescue unit.

After some back and forth, that was the agreement we reached. We filled in the blanks, signed the papers, and had a nice lunch in public to show that good relations had been assured.

There was one funny incident I would like to add here. For the Icelandic side, Robert Trausti Arnasson was head of the defense department, which had four people. During the discussions, the two sides were talking about the air force pilots. Arnasson then said to the foreign minister, "I want to put it on record for the minister's technical understanding that if the pilots are on strip alert, it does not mean they are sitting in the planes in their underwear."

That brought a chuckle to the group which helped cut through the inevitable tension.

In fact, as part of the agreement, the pilots in the four planes would no longer be on strip alert. They were going to be awake and run to the planes from their dorms, but they didn't have to be aboard 24/7, freezing in their planes.

So we reached that agreement, which was pretty much along the lines I had recommended. We also reached an agreement, which I had put in there, about cutting costs and Iceland's responsibility for doing so. That had been a long-term irritant. Now, the Icelanders needed us more than we needed them, so this was the time to reduce our costs. They agreed.

Q: You were saying that part of these negotiations were being conducted in Reykjavik, and part in Washington.

SCHMIEL: Yes, but the key issues would not be resolved until Perry made the executive decision.

Q: So when an Icelandic delegation would go to Washington to pursue those talks, would you necessarily go back to Washington and participate?

SCHMIEL: Yes, we always went back. Sometimes we went commercial with Icelandair, but at least two of the times we went on a P-3. Admiral Haskins also used this as an opportunity to get his flight hours, and he often piloted the plane for at least some of the voyage. By the way, the Navy made the P-3s relatively comfortable, but they were not airliners. They are spy planes.

Q: Submarine chasers. That would certainly be important in that part of the world, especially if you read Tom Clancy.

SCHMIEL: Yes.

In December 1993, the big agreement was signed. The next year and a half was spent implementing it. Looking at the agreement in two years was after my time.

Q: You were chargé and very busy for the first part of your tour. Then Parker Borg comes in as ambassador. How do your duties shift then with his arrival?

SCHMIEL: The traditional DCM had always been the Political Military Liaison to the base, so that continued. Obviously, I was much more heavily involved. I did all the details. I went to all the meetings. I was the main liaison, as well as supervising the embassy.

Parker Borg is an outside person. He liked to go off and make speeches and travel around the country, meeting people. I'm an inside person, working the paper, personnel, etcetera, so that worked out very well. So our relationship worked well since we were so different.

I should mention that as part of that process I continued to build on another change I had implemented soon after arriving. When I got there, some of the Americans in the embassy told me that relations with the base had not been very good for some time. They told me that the previous DCM and other charges hadn't talked to the people at the base very much.

As you might expect, I was startled by this. Our primary national security objective was to keep the base, and we didn't have good relations with these people? Ridiculous.

I then had asked, " Don't they come to our staff meetings? Don't we go to their staff meetings?"

"Oh no, we don't do that."

"Why?"

"Well we never have."

That was clearly the wrong answer, and I determined to change that policy.

There was a monthly staff meeting at the base. I went to all of those, even when I was Chargé. The admiral, or his deputy, always came to our Monday morning embassy staff meetings from then on. If we were going to work together, if our objective to keep the base was in our national interest, we had to coordinate and cooperate closely. That worked out very well. Relations could not have been better after that.

In another step to cement good relations and improve U.S. planning, as we were drafting a new mission program plan, I discussed it with Admiral Haskins. When I told him about the process, he confessed that he had never heard of it and the embassy had never shared it with him either in advance or after the fact! Nor had the embassy apparently ever shared it with a commanding Admiral. Again, ridiculous – and I told the embassy staff and the Admiral that that was my view.

So, when I began drafting the Mission Program plan, I sent the Admiral my draft and invited his input. He made some valuable commentary, and so the final product we sent in was a combined evaluation of U.S. interests in Iceland – as it always should have been.

Q: Iceland, like Hawaii, has a pretty high cost of living because it's an island and everything has to be …

SCHMIEL: They have little farms. They have great fish and lamb, but the lamb is not in great quantity. They consume more Coca Cola and Cheerios per person than anywhere else in the world. This is a product of the years of occupation during World War Two and the large number of people at the base.

For several years, the only radio station in Iceland was the base radio. There was no television. These are a few of the little peculiarities of this little country.

Q: How much of an observation post was Iceland to other European issues?

SCHMIEL: Not much, because Iceland was in so many ways different. It was a NATO member with no military, a European country but not a member of the EU (European Union). It was adamant about not joining the EU because of the 200-mile limit on fishing.

Back in the 1950s, Iceland engaged in the "Cod War" with the British. The British tried to go fishing in Iceland's waters, and that was one of the reasons Iceland declared the 200-mile limit, since fishing was so critical to the economy. If they joined the EU, they would have to open their fisheries to everybody, which means they would essentially have to get a check from the EU to make up for the income lost to the Spanish, Portuguese, Brits, and other trawlers which would be getting so much of their fish.

Iceland had closer ties to the Nordic group. That was probably their main focus in Europe, rather than the European Union. In NATO, being small, they really didn't have much influence.

Q: It doesn't sound like you were overwhelmed with Congressional Delegations.

SCHMIEL: No, I don't recall any.

Q: During the Reagan period, Reagan went up to Reykjavik for that famous meeting. Other than that, there were no other high level visitors.

SCHMIEL: Other than Deputy Secretary Perry for our agreed minute and the agreed signatures, no.

Actually, I should mention another happy coincidence related to that meeting. That evening, there was yet another fishing accident. This is in December. An Icelandic fishing boat had lost power and had been battered up against the shore in the northeast in a howling, freezing gale. The U.S. Air Force search and rescue unit was asked to help to rescue them, and they did, in 30-knot winds and howling sleet, rescuing all eight sailors.

The next morning Iceland's major paper, Morgunblaðið – Iceland has 300,000 people and four newspapers – which had a tradition of only putting international news on the front page, national news on the back page, reversed policy by putting on the front page headlines announcing, "Americans Rescue Eight Fishermen" and "Agreed Minute Signed."

Icelandic-American relations were very good at the time, but those two events moved them into a positive era never before achieved. Not only had we reached an agreement on the base and our pol-mil relationship as equals, but also the USA had helped save eight of their fishermen, a critical part of their economy. The timing could not have been any better.

Q: If the navy is running P-3s, don't they need a search and rescue unit too?

SCHMIEL: Do you mean if they were not…

Q: It sounds as though the search and rescue unit was there for the air force only.

SCHMIEL: It was an air force unit.

Q: And the navy didn't have such a unit.

SCHMIEL: No, but the SAR unit was for them also.

Q: Other than that, working with the navy and air force colleagues was…

SCHMIEL: It was very good, and I did everything I could to make sure it stayed that way, as did Parker Borg.

Q: If you were to run into somebody in the halls of the State Department now, how would you recommend an assignment in Reykjavik? What would you say?

SCHMIEL: Perhaps not now that most of the issues have been resolved and the base has been closed – unfortunately in my view. Iceland is now more Europe-focused. They went through, to say the least, a difficult economic time, essentially obliterating their economy by going into debt. The three main banks owed more money than the gross national product of the country. When they imploded, they almost destroyed their currency.

Other than that, it's a very pleasant place. To say the least, the national interests of the United States are minimal. They were in the middle range when I was there. They are minimal now. Unless you want a couple of years of vacation and like ice-skating, an Icelandic assignment would be very boring.

On the other hand, I must say that I am astonished about the money we are wasting at the embassy these days in keeping up a staffing level larger than what it was when I was there. Which makes little sense.

About six months before I left, the marine security guard unit was shut down. We had a farewell ceremony for them. We took down the flag, etcetera. We switched to local guards. The base was still open then, though at a much reduced size because of our negotiations. Now the base is closed, but the marine security guard detachment has been revived.

Further, a few months before I left, the Department advised that the DCM position was going to be downgraded, with my successor likely taking over the political officer's duties, given the reduced size of our interests. So, my wife and I were told to pack up the DCM's official plates and silverware, and ship them back, and they would be sent to a more prominent embassy.

As you might expect, I was surprised, later, to hear that the position was not in fact downgraded, and they still have both a DCM and a political officer.

Further, while the USIA office and the related library were closed, the embassy now has a public diplomacy officer again.

The embassy is now larger than it was when I was there -- an incredible waste of money.

Q: You left Reykjavik in the summer of 1995.

SCHMIEL: Yes.

Q: And you returned to the Hill where you had a previous experience. How did that come about?

SCHMIEL: Well I had an assignment in Personnel and wasn't doing very much. One day I just happened to call John Moseman, who had been the Chief of Staff for Senator Murkowski in 1985, to keep in touch. He said that by coincidence the foreign policy person for Senator Murkowski was about to go on maternity leave. He suggested that perhaps we could work out a deal where the State Department could send me over there again for an ad hoc congressional fellowship one more time.

Q: Wait a minute. You're sitting in Personnel?

SCHMIEL: I was working in Personnel Evaluation.

Q: Was that a permanent assignment out of Reykjavik?

SCHMIEL: It was a one-year assignment, but I wasn't doing anything of great substance.

I floated this idea with the personnel people and they agreed, and so I was seconded, once again, to Capitol Hill to work with Senator Murkowski. I knew him. I knew the issues. He had in that time moved over from the Foreign Relations to the Finance Committee, because Finance did trade, and trade was his major focus. However, the WTO (World Trade Organization) had already been created and was in place, so there weren't that many big issues to deal with in trade at the time.

So I spent another five months on the Hill.

In December 1995, the Clinton Administration and the new Republican majority on the hill, which had been elected in 1994, came to loggerheads. Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton, two very large egos, two very powerful people, were in charge. The Republicans had put forth a balanced budget. Clinton said he wouldn't accept it, and he put forth his own balanced budget proposal.

Both of them were full of loopholes. It was part façade and part reality, but that's the way things are done on the Hill. Here we were in December, not only without a budget, but also several appropriations bills had not been signed. There had been continuing resolutions to keep the funding going, but the Republicans on the Hill, especially in the House, refused to pass any more continuing resolutions until Clinton accepted their balanced budget proposal – which of course he was not going to do. So for the first time, the cry of "shut down the government" was heard – and that's what happened.

So, in the middle of December, with were several agencies unfunded, including the State Department, I got a phone call from the State Department saying that until the State Department appropriation was passed or there was a continuing resolution, I could not work for Senator Murkowski, because I was, in effect, volunteering, which was illegal under, I believe, the Hatch Act. So I had to leave the office. I told Murkowski that I would love to stay, but I couldn't volunteer. I was gone probably three or four days, until they broke the impasse.

At the same time in Washington, there was a snowstorm of epic proportions, perhaps 36 inches of snow. The government was not only essentially frozen in the budget process, but nothing physically in the city was moving. For three days, the government was officially closed, except for essential personnel.

I bring all this up because one of the ways in which some agencies, including the White House, got around the problem of not having enough personnel, was by using interns more efficiently, and putting them to work, because they weren't being paid. In many agencies, including the White House, interns were doing a lot more things than they would have done normally.

At this time, there was a young lady interning at the White House named Monica Lewinsky, who was much more involved in a variety of things, e.g. getting pizza, and other things. Apparently, at the time, she caught the President's attention. The rest is a very deplorable history.

When I was working at the Washington Internship Institute, every semester I told the new students that they would have various stereotypes to overcome. One of them was that they were just like the world's most infamous intern, Monica.

In any case, I soon returned to work for the senator, who, as I think I mentioned before, was the closest friend of Taiwan in the Senate. He had pushed through a few months before the visa for President Lee Teng-hui to visit the U.S., which caused a rift in U.S.-China relations. That was still emanating.

Q: Can you talk about that?

SCHMIEL: It was before my time; but I was still catching the flack. Senator Murkowski had no regrets whatsoever.

One other interesting thing we did during my tenure was to pass a resolution about Korea and the nuclear negotiations that I suggested to him. He had told me when I re-joined the staff that he wanted to stay active with foreign relations, even though he was no longer on the Foreign Relations Committee.

I spoke to the Foreign Relations Committee staff and said, "The senator would like to bring this out of committee," which was code that he advocated it.

We wrote a letter on his behalf to others in the Senate advocating bringing up the resolution and nudging the administration. The real reason was so he could issue a press release that showed he still played a role in the Korea issue.

Otherwise, his focus was Asian trade -- Alaska is closer to Asia – and Russia -- than any other state.

Q: Yes, to Russia.

Q: It's also an interesting illustration of how initiatives out of the Congress come for public relations purposes or re-election purposes, even though they may get tangled up in the larger issue of what U.S. foreign policy might be.

SCHMIEL: It was a non-binding resolution, so we eventually got it out of committee and it was adopted, but it had no effect on policy.

I do remember that Senator Murkowski was very suspicious of Korea policy under the Bush Administration, as well as the Clinton Administration. At various times, I would explain it to him, because I had been there. I was one of the creators of the policy. And so, clearly, it was interesting to be a congressional fellow again.

Q: You had the time on the Korea desk. You had seen it under the Bush and the start of the Clinton Administration. So his curiosity or point of view wasn't interfered with by the various ways in which you could describe how things were unfolding, and why they were unfolding.

SCHMIEL: No, Senator Murkowski had several idées fixes (fixed ideas). Nothing short of nuclear weapons would shake his views on certain issues, and I did not have any intellectual nuclear weapons. I explained it to him, again and again, but it really made no difference.

Q: In this iteration, you're already familiar with each other. What is your personal interaction as a staffer with the senator?

SCHMIEL: It was quite minimal, actually, especially since foreign relations had taken on a smaller role in his political universe. When I was in the House in Cheney's office, it was so small that you interacted almost constantly with the member of Congress. With the Senate, even for a senator from Alaska, there was a two-floor office and 30 staff, so I didn't see him that much. We got along quite well and would chat. The idea of the two of us going out to lunch, as I did with Dick Cheney twice, the thought of us having a beer somewhere, just never occurred. He had a certain aloofness. He was not a hail-fellow, well met type of person.

The first time I worked for him in 1985 was during his first term. He was nervous about re-election. He was re-elected in 1986 and again in 1992 by very large margins, so he had a safe seat.

Also, he was overshadowed by Alaska's other Senator; Ted Stevens was the senior senator, who later became President pro tem (President pro tempore) of the Senate.

Q: Was there the same differentiation you described before between the personal staff and the political staff?

SCHMIEL: Yes, the political staff were in their own little compartment within the office, with a door physically separating the political fundraisers from everybody else.

Q: How did they use you for these six months?

SCHMIEL: For foreign policy.

Q: Did you write things?

SCHMIEL: Yes, perhaps more than I expected. John Moseman had hired another fellow to be the foreign policy expert, and I was kind of an additional person. The fellow they hired came from the private sector. Learning the ways of Congress is not easy. He had difficulty adapting, so I was doing a lot of things he was supposed to be doing.

Then I remember that in April, we had a softball game on the Mall against another Senator's staff. This fellow was playing third base in this game and wore his sunglasses. He got a bad hop. The ball smacked him right above the bridge of his nose. I think he got particles of glass in his eye. He was out of the office two weeks recuperating. He didn't lose his sight, but he didn't look very good for quite a while. So I had to do most of his work also.

There was no major piece of legislation, no major project on foreign policy. The big issues of trade had been decided. The WTO was in place. In terms of major events, there weren't any.

Q: You mentioned earlier that working on the Hill is its own experience. Would you draw a comparison between working at the State Department and its clearance process, and working on the hill and its networking process? Or is that a proper comparison? What's unique about working on the hill?

SCHMIEL: I now recall former Secretary of State George Schulz saying that there are 536 Secretaries of State. He had the title, but the other 535 people up on the Hill think that they are running the show. In that sense, everyone is trying to influence every policy in every way, some more than others.

On the Hill, as in State, networking is key. Information is power, as Henry Kissinger once said. Knowing what the issues are, knowing what's going on, knowing who is taking up what, when they are taking it up and when they're not taking it up, and why, all were necessary to get anything done.

Every Tuesday in the Senate, each party has a policy lunch in which their leaders put forth the major foci of the week, including issues and legislations, and make appropriate appeals for support.

The first votes during the week are at 2:30 in the afternoon on Tuesday. There are never any votes on Monday or Friday, because members want to travel to the district. Because Alaska was so far away, Murkowski traveled far less than most members, but then he had a safe seat also.

Once the week's agenda was set, John Moseman would brief me and tell me what was going on and we would act appropriately.

Q: Good morning. It's January 27th, 2010. We are finishing up our conversation with Gene Schmiel.

What was the date of your retirement?

SCHMIEL: September 30th, 1996.

Q: You have an interesting retirement, which only points out how talented Foreign Service Officers are.

In 1997, you joined the Institution for Experiential Learning. How did that come about?

SCHMIEL: In 1996, it was the Institute for Experiential, not Experimental. We didn't do any experiments.

During my last few months in the Department, I was on the Hill, and then I went over and was on a USIA selection board for a few weeks. I then took the three month retirement seminar which was provided for retirees to begin preparations for retirement and/or new professional opportunities.

My first thought was to return to academe, to be a professor once again. However, I ran into one of those peculiarities of the academy. Henry Kissinger once said, "Why are the debates and dislikes of academe so intense? He replied, 'Because the issues are so small.'"

I made some inquiries to universities, looking at The Chronicle of Higher Education, where academic positions are listed. I made inquiries in history departments, but their uniform response was that whereas my academic specialty had been 19th Century American History, I had not done anything in the field for the previous 25 years, so I could not be up to date in the field.

Then I asked International Relations departments about teaching in that field, noting my experience in the Foreign Service.

Their response was that my degree was in history, and I had no academic background in international relations, nor was I an expert on international relations theory. So I was caught in between.

Then one day, looking through the help wanted ads in the newspaper, I saw an ad for the Institute for Experiential Learning, saying they were beginning a program for Swedish students and internships. They needed someone to teach a course in journalistic writing.

Well, I had a 4/4 in Swedish and I interviewed for the position, and I was hired.

While there I also got in touch with Marymount University in Arlington, VA, and taught one course in American History.

Meanwhile, at the institute, I taught that one course and also did some development work, fundraising, and planning. Then things changed considerably.

The organization's director said to me one day that she had always wanted to create a special program for students interested in international relations. They would intern at embassies in Washington, and they would be taught a course in international relations and how it's really practiced. She said that to do the program she needed someone with both diplomatic experience and academic experience, complete with a Ph.D. I fit the bill on all accounts, so she proposed that we create this new internship program and that I became a full-time employee.

I said that before we did it, I wanted to make sure we had enough embassies who agreed to take students. Students also could go to other organizations like Amnesty International, or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce International Division, since international is broadly defined. But, I said, if we were going to call the program something like the Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars (the name I later created), we had to have some embassies willing to accept students.

I went to a variety of people at the State Department and got introductions to embassies. I started with the Baltics, because of a fellow named Andrew Selsky. He was the desk officer for the Baltics, but he also had taken responsibility for Iceland, we were in contact. He got me introductions to the Latvians, Lithuanians, and the Estonians, all of whom agreed to have interns. I got the Icelanders to agree also, and we had already been sending students to the French and New Zealand embassies.

Once we had a group of ten embassies, we launched the program. We created a special brochure. We got together a group of retired diplomats to be an advisory board, which we put in the publicity. Ambassador Bill Harrop, Ambassador Don Norland, and Ambassador Tom Niles, who had been assistant secretary for Europe, were on the first list.

We launched the program in 1998, and it is still today (as of 2010) the basis for the international-related programs at WII in each of the three semesters – fall, spring, and summer. The average class has about 15 students, which was also an objective since each group established its own identity.

Q: What's the source of the interns?

SCHMIEL: We have relations with numerous schools. Rutgers is the biggest one. Roger Williams of Rhode Island, Lynn University of Florida, and Elon University of North Carolina are in the group. We form relationships with some schools, e.g. Dominican of Chicago, so that we are their internship program in their college catalog. If students come to Washington, they come to our program.

We have competitors who are trying to do this also, so we also changed the name of the organization to help in the competition, changing it to "Washington Internship Institute." That in turn was much easier to find on the Internet via search engines and was a better link to potential students.

Now, if you google "internship," and "Washington," WII comes up first, not last.

We also have international students. As of eight or nine years ago, we were authorized to issue exchange visitor visas. We have the Swedish program that is still going on in the fall and spring. (The program ceased to function in 2012)

The WII organization was a very small operation, with a staff of six. The advantage is that we get to know every student. They have our housing, our classes, and the internships. To this day, I get inquiries from students from four, five or six years ago, to write letters of recommendation.

Q: This is not only an internship where the individual gets experience with various and sundry offices and agencies, but you are also running a training program.

SCHMIEL: Right. They intern four days a week full-time at a variety of embassies or other international organizations. We have three at the U.S. Coast Guard's International Division, and also one each at National Defense University and Amnesty International.

One day a week, we have classes. One class is called the Internship Seminar. Essentially, it is career and professional development, how to be professional.

The second is an academic class. For the embassy scholars, it is a class that I created for the program, the Policy and Practice of International Relations, with a focus on American Foreign Policymaking.

As I noted earlier, I have no great knowledge of international relations theory, but I have some knowledge of international relations practice, so the focus of the class is how foreign policy is made and implemented. I do this through lectures and briefings at agencies and embassies. We go to the State Department, the Defense Department, and also often to the European Union Embassy and the IMF (International Monetary Fund). We also have people come in to speak to the class, such as an International Atomic

Energy Agency (IAEA) representative, Andy Semmel. Ambassador Harrop comes to speak about what makes a good ambassador. We use Washington as a classroom, to the maximum extent. At the State Department, we go to the Operations Center.

One key objective is to learn about foreign policy and how to implement it, but it's also to meet real people. We tell the students that the people they meet are in seats where they could be in 10-20 years. I tell them that they've read about people making policy in the abstract. By contrast, they are meeting real people doing concrete things. They get up in the morning. They have to pay a mortgage. They have to raise a family. Here's what they do for a living. That's an integral part of the program, bringing together the career development and the professional development aspects of practical learning.

Q: One of the other things that I know you've gotten into is that you are also assisting the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA).

SCHMIEL: Yes, I'm a member and a Chairman of the High School Essay Contest.

Q: What is AFSA and what are some of these programs?

SCHMIEL: The American Foreign Service Association is the professional association of the people in the Foreign Service across the agencies. I have been a member for quite some time, and several of my WII students interned at AFSA. They asked me to be chairman of the High School Essay Contest, in which high school students are asked to write about how the Foreign Service improves the life of people overseas or in the United States.

Q: Now, these would be sons and daughters of foreign service people.

SCHMIEL: No, only people who are not involved in the Foreign Service are allowed to participate in the contest. The winner gets a $2,500 prize. They come to Washington and meet the Secretary on Awards Day. Again, it is designed to generate interest in the Foreign Service among people who may not know about it otherwise.

I also was persuaded to join the AFSA PAC (Political Action Committee) to do what other PACs do, win friends and influence people.

Q: On the Hill.

SCHMIEL: On the Hill.

Q: The labor union has started a process where it contributes money.

SCHMIEL: It contributes money, goes to fundraisers, and hands over checks.

Q: To politicians.

SCHMIEL: To politicians in the Senate and the House. By rule, one-half of them must be Democrats; one-half of them must be Republicans. The practice has been to divide it up, half to the Senate, half to the House. As a matter of fact, in an hour or so, we are meeting and probably going to divvy up the money for this year.

Q: This is one way for AFSA to make itself known on the Hill and get Hill attention to the kinds of personnel and policy issues that it wants to bring forth.

SCHMIEL: There is constant lobbying by AFSA on the Hill for its interests. The State Department can only inform; AFSA can lobby for its interests. I always ask my students, "What clause of the Constitution permits lobbying?"

They usually don't know. It is the right of the citizen to petition for the redress of grievances.

AFSA-PAC was designed to gain influence. For example, for the last couple of years, the AFSA PAC gave money to a junior senator from Illinois named Obama. Whether it's had any influence or not, I don't know, but that's one of the realities.

Q: That's the point. That's one of the realities of operating in the modern environment: getting your issues in front of the Congress.

SCHMIEL: Right. And getting to know the Congress, because of the State Department's relations with the Congress. I remember back in 1985 when I was taking a class at the American Political Science Association, at SAIS preparing for the congressional fellowship, we had a speaker snidely comment that "Oh yes, the State Department: their relations with the Hill? They practice preemptive capitulation."

One of the reasons why the State Department has always been a threadbare organization is that it doesn't know how to lobby on the Hill. Also, for a very long time State Department appropriations were with the State-Justice-Commerce sub-committee.

Q: Actually, this is not well understood, how the various agencies are bundled in their approach to the hill. The budgets of Justice, Commerce and State are bundled together. So State is not bundled with the Defense Department, it's bundled with the Justice Department.

SCHMIEL: About two years ago, this was finally changed, and State is no longer with Commerce and Justice. It's considered for the first time as a national security agency.

Also, about ten years ago, the State Department finally opened an office on Capitol Hill which can be another effective voice for the agency. The Defense Department has several offices on Capitol Hill, but the State Department never had one.

Q: In your years on Capitol Hill, what kinds of stereotypes of the Foreign Service and Foreign Service Officer did you bump into?

SCHMIEL: Not as many as I thought. I think there was a general feeling that the State Department had good people, the elite of the government. Foreign Service Officers were considered the elite, and the Foreign Service was very highly respected.

I think the State Department was not considered a major actor on the Hill in bureaucratic terms, but the Foreign Service was highly respected.

Q: One last thought on this: there is a perception that when Colin Powell was Secretary of State, he expressed an interest in the resources for the organization, perhaps more than other Secretaries of State. Do you…

SCHMIEL: By a factor of one thousand.

Q: You would agree with that observation?

SCHMIEL: Very much so.

Q: Was his involvement successful?

SCHMIEL: I wasn't in State at the time, but my perception was that it was. I came back to State in 2004. The perception was that not only did Colin Powell understand bureaucracy, since he was someone who had come in at the bottom at Defense and worked his way up, but he was also someone who really understood how to keep the troops happy, by giving them the tools they needed to do the job. The perception and the reality of him was one who worked with the institution: absolutely, top notch.

Q: In your retirement experience, you first go back to your academic interest, and this seminar that you are putting on. In 2004, you actually come back to the State Department on a WAE (When Actually Employed) basis. You are now applying your foreign service skills. You become a member of PMAT (Political Military Action Team), which is

embedded in the Political Military Bureau. Would you describe that office and what it does?

SCHMIEL: As one wag said, it's the Political Military Geriatric Team.

Q: Space Cowboys of PM.

SCHMIEL: They are all retirees on the State side. It's a very interesting experience. I had political military experience in Djibouti and in Mombasa, working with the navy. Certainly when I worked on the Korea desk, and in Reykjavik, there was a great deal of political military activity.

It was interesting to come back to see how the technology had evolved, to see for myself what Colin Powell had done. At my last job in the department at the Korea desk, everything was on paper. A pile of paper – cables, reports, requests for action, etc. -- was put on my desk every hour to deal with. I did have a computer for drafting, and we could send emails, but only to the embassy in Seoul.

Walking into PMAT, I discovered that there was no paper. Everything was on a computer screen. The first time that I logged on, I looked at the bottom of the screen and it said, "9,147 items."

Q: In your email?

SCHMIEL: No, not the email. I think it was just the cable express list of all documents then available. I said, "How in the world am I going to deal with nine thousand items?

My transition in learning how to deal with this massive amount of information electronically lasted about two weeks. I had to learn how to find things, how to do the search, understand what was there and what was not there. It was a team effort. The people who were on before me handed on things, and our efforts reinforced one another.

Q: What was the duty of PMAT?

SCHMIEL: Essentially, it was to be the State Department's liaison to the Defense Department 24/7 (24 hours day, 7 days a week). The Political Military Bureau was that liaison, but generally speaking only from 9:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the evening. In emergencies, PMAT acted as needed to coordinate policy when the fighting was going on in both Iraq and Afghanistan. There was a great deal of activity and liaison work, so that the State Department would know what was going on at the Pentagon and help ensure that the two agencies were working together effectively.

Q: To make sure the Pentagon had a one-stop shopping place it could go to if it needed anything.

SCHMIEL: Right.

Q: And it is 24/7. So you must have enjoyed at your age those 11:00 o'clock at night to 7:00 o'clock in the morning shifts?

SCHMIEL: As much as possible, yes. (No, not really!).

There are two interesting aspects of the job. After you finish your shift, you hand over everything you have done and brief the next person, and you have no further responsibilities since it is a TEAM. By contrast, on a country desk, there is no other person, so you never could hand it on to anyone because there is always something happening. On the PMAT team, someone else has to deal with it, so that reduces the pressure and stress. Working two and three days a week at most, there is a chance to get some rest, although I still kept my job at the Washington Internship Institute until 2012. I jokingly used to tell young people, "I am retired and I have two jobs. Be careful with your future planning."

At PMAT every day is different. Not only were we dealing with the wars and terrorism, but also with natural disasters, e.g. the Tsunami in Asia, the Hurricane Katrina experience, and the earthquake in Haiti. PMAT was there as the resource to be called on instantly and be readily available to do the job during a crisis.

Q: This is actually a function that keeps you up on all the crises that are going on worldwide that involve the State Department and the Pentagon.

SCHMIEL: Yes. In addition, given the nature of the course I was teaching, it was very useful for my teaching. I was teaching students about current foreign issues and foreign policy, and now I was much better placed to speak about that – in an unclassified way, of course.

In addition, since I now had renewed contacts in State, I was able to arrange for my students to meet Department leaders, many of whom were A-100 students of mine. These included Deputy Secretary Bill Burns, Ambassadors David Satterfield and Scott DeLisi, and others.

Q: It sounds like you've had a great career, applying your expertise to the Foreign Service and gaining some interesting Foreign Service experiences.

SCHMIEL: And I'm trying to get people interested in the Foreign Service from my classes. Two or three have made it in. We also have several working at the Agency (CIA, Central Intelligence Agency), DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency), and others around town.

Q: So you would still encourage people to get involved with the Foreign Service?

SCHMIEL: Oh yes, it's an interesting career, though one that is very different from what it was when I joined. People have to be much more adaptable. Families have to be very close. There has to be a lot more discussion among spouses as to what this is all about.

Q: How do your kids feel about having been Foreign Service raised?

SCHMIEL: They don't know anything else. So they have nothing to compare it with. Our son was a year and a half old when we got to Stockholm, and our daughter was born there. Their formative years were Foreign Service years.

This is one of the things I tell my current students. If you join the Foreign Service, do it while your kids are either young or non-existent. If you do it after they are three or four years old, they have incredible roots, and they are not really adaptable to change after that.

On the other hand, my children had no interest in the Foreign Service as a career. They have decided to have domestic careers – as my daughter says, they already had the Foreign Service experience when they were growing up.

My children have five sons among them, and maybe they will be interested in the Foreign Service. My first grandson, I remember when he was about two and a half years old, we were at his house and we were going off somewhere. As we were leaving, he said, "Bye Ethan's house." That is his life. To have his parents take someone like that and put him in the Foreign Service, saying he will move some place and then some other different place every two years would be just wrenching.

As for our children, I think the Foreign Service experience made them much more cosmopolitan people. They have seen all different cultures, all different peoples, and all different races. They are much more open to new experiences, even though they are going to stay put. They can see people as people, not as members of groups.

Q: When you were in South Africa, Roots came out.

SCHMIEL: The television series, Roots, came out while we were in South Africa, and USIA decided to show it for the public in Pretoria and Johannesburg. They knew at the embassy that I had been a history professor with 19th Century America as my emphasis. So I was invited up to Pretoria and Johannesburg and I spoke to several groups of people at screenings of Roots. I provided the context of the nineteenth century in America and also made the comparisons with the situation in South Africa. I noted how we had, and had not, resolved our problems.

I also forgot to mention that while we were in South Africa, I got to know one of the professors at the University of Durban, and I persuaded him to arrange for me to do a five-week Black American History course, a series of lectures about black Americans from the beginning through to 1975. That was quite controversial; and I am sure the government was not pleased. However, I completed the course and I was able to keep in practice with teaching History.

Q: I think it's an interesting way in which the foreign service experience allows you to use your training and your talents, which you acquired prior to joining the Foreign Service.

Did you do much public speaking in the U.S. on leave to American audiences?

SCHMIEL: No, but in Iceland, the National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, Albert Jonsson, was also a professor at the university. We of course worked professionally on U.S. – Icelandic relations, but once he asked me to talk to a class regarding developments in Korea. I did so and lectured at a couple of other classes of his.

A few years later, Albert Jonsson was Iceland's Ambassador to the United States. So I took advantage of our past relationship and asked him to speak to my classes of interns about life as an Ambassador and U.S.-Icelandic relations. He was very willing to do so and did a great job, which further enhanced the experience for my students.

Q: We appreciate the time you have spent with us. Thank you very much.

End of interview